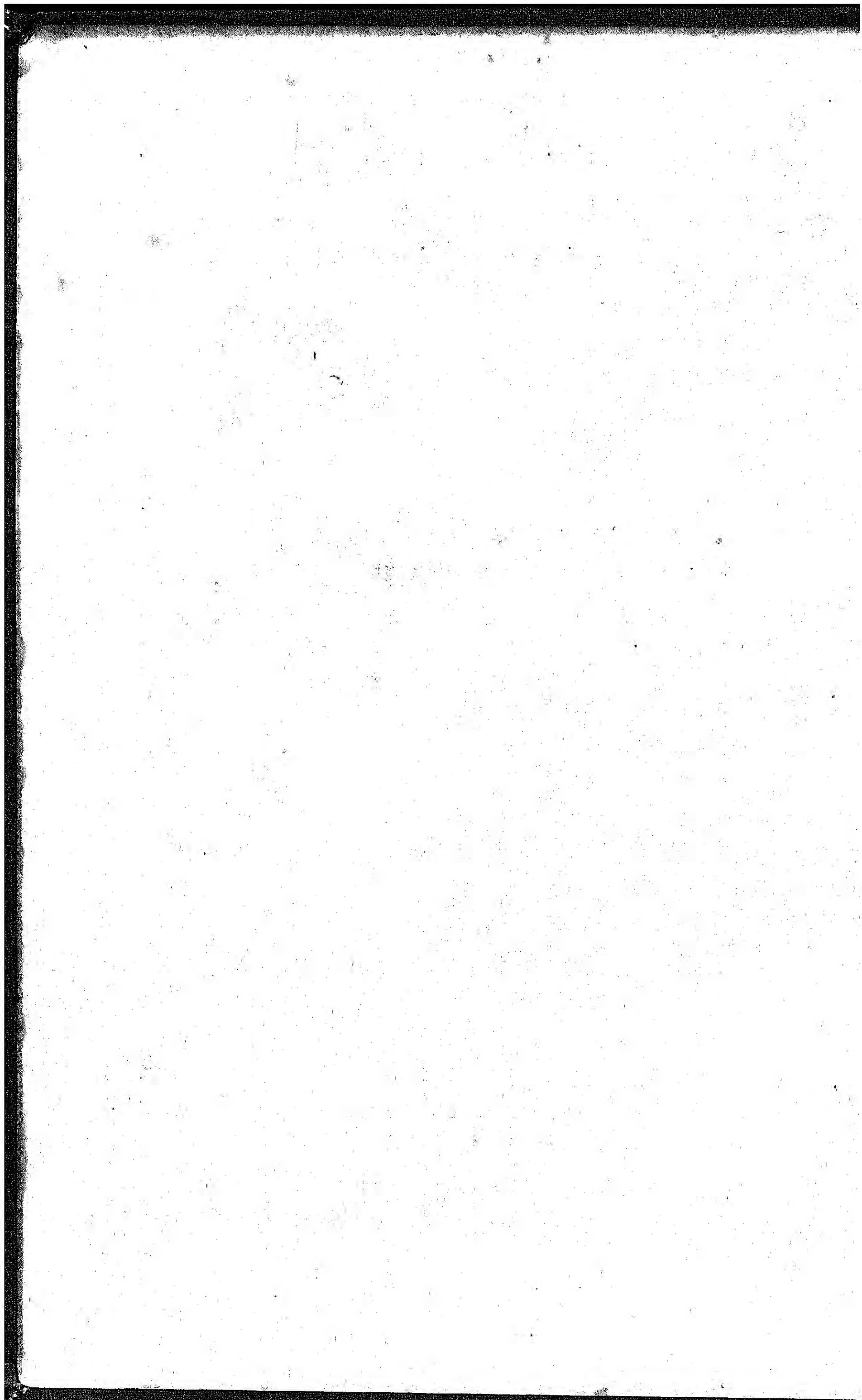
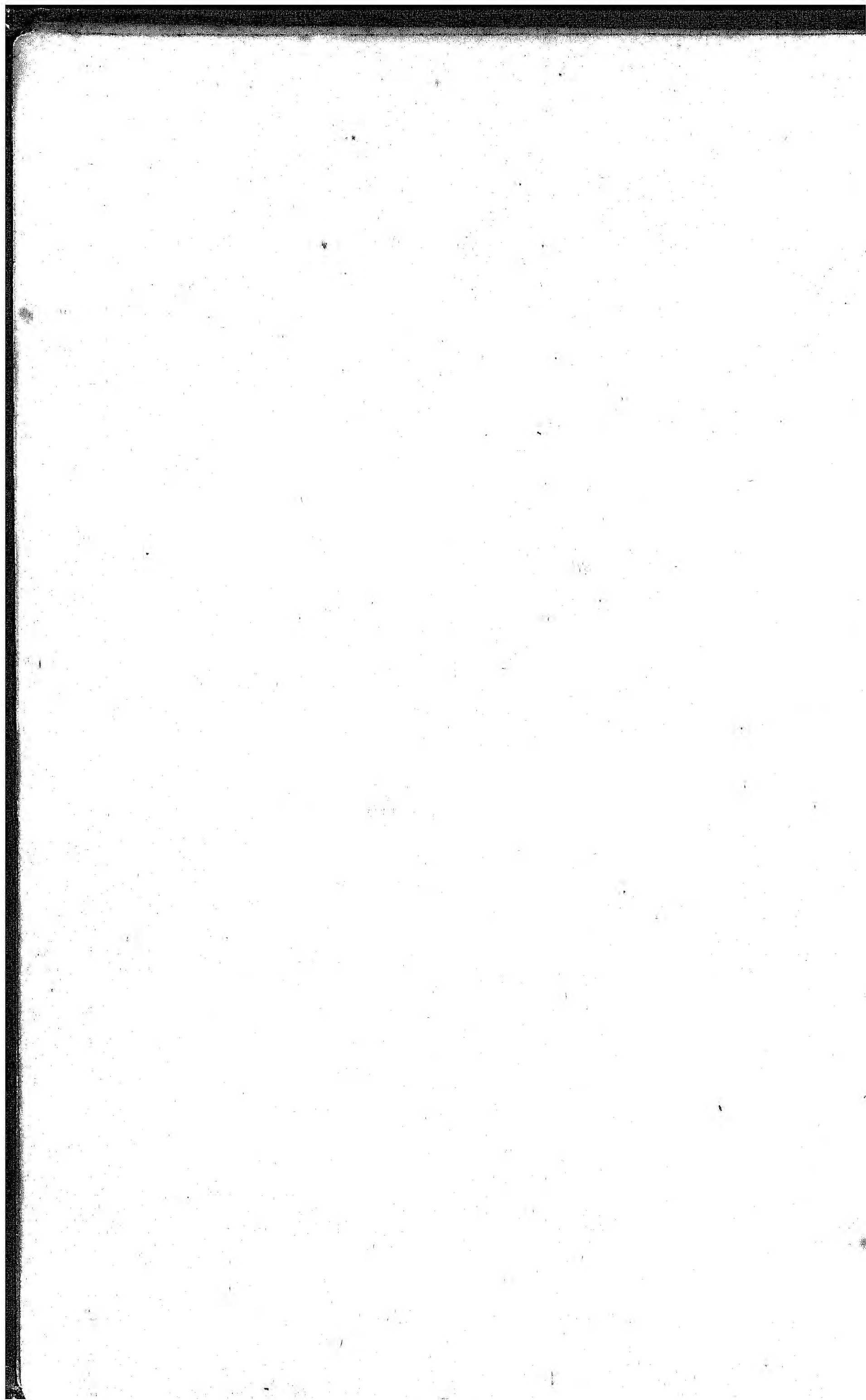




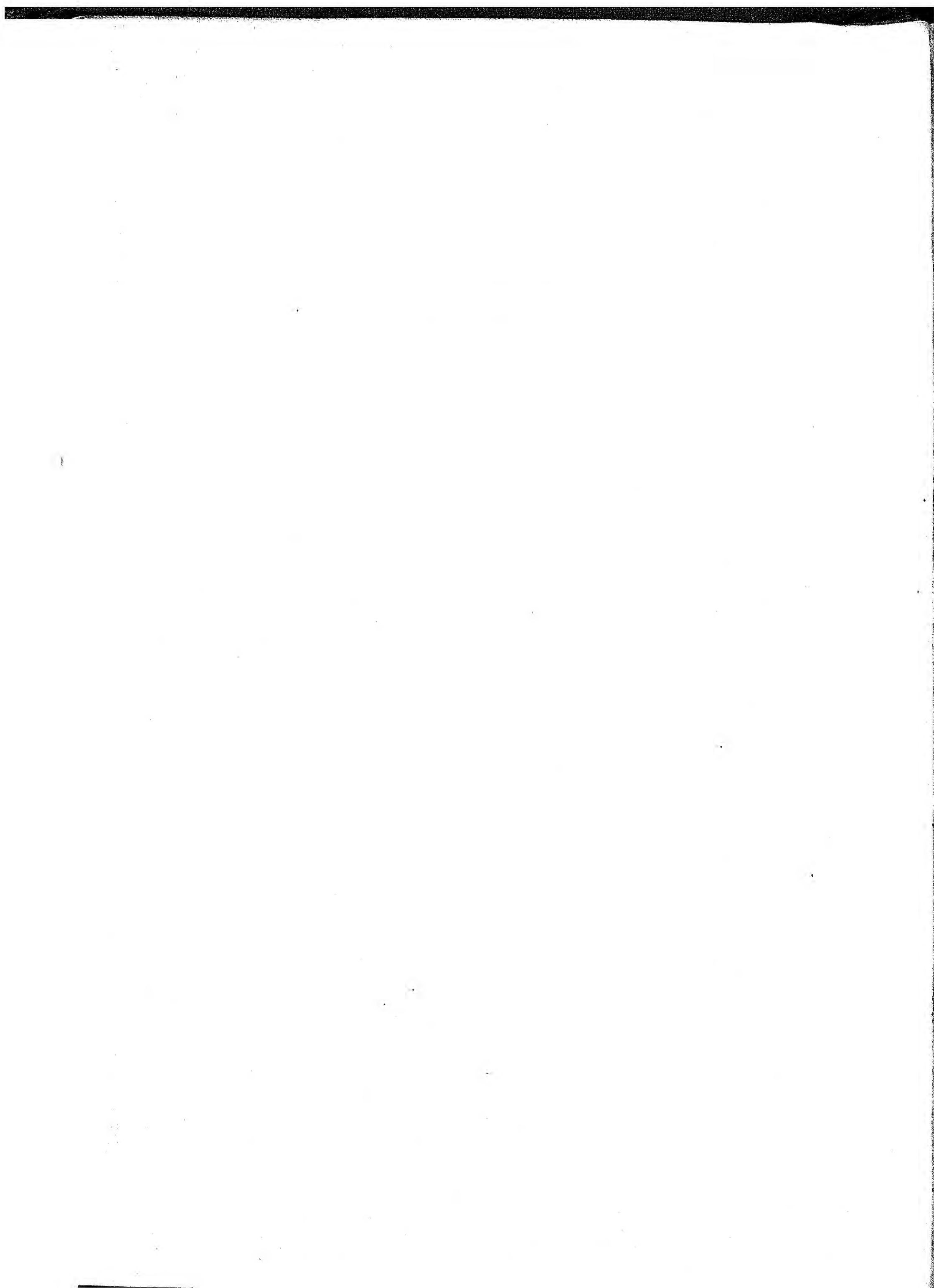
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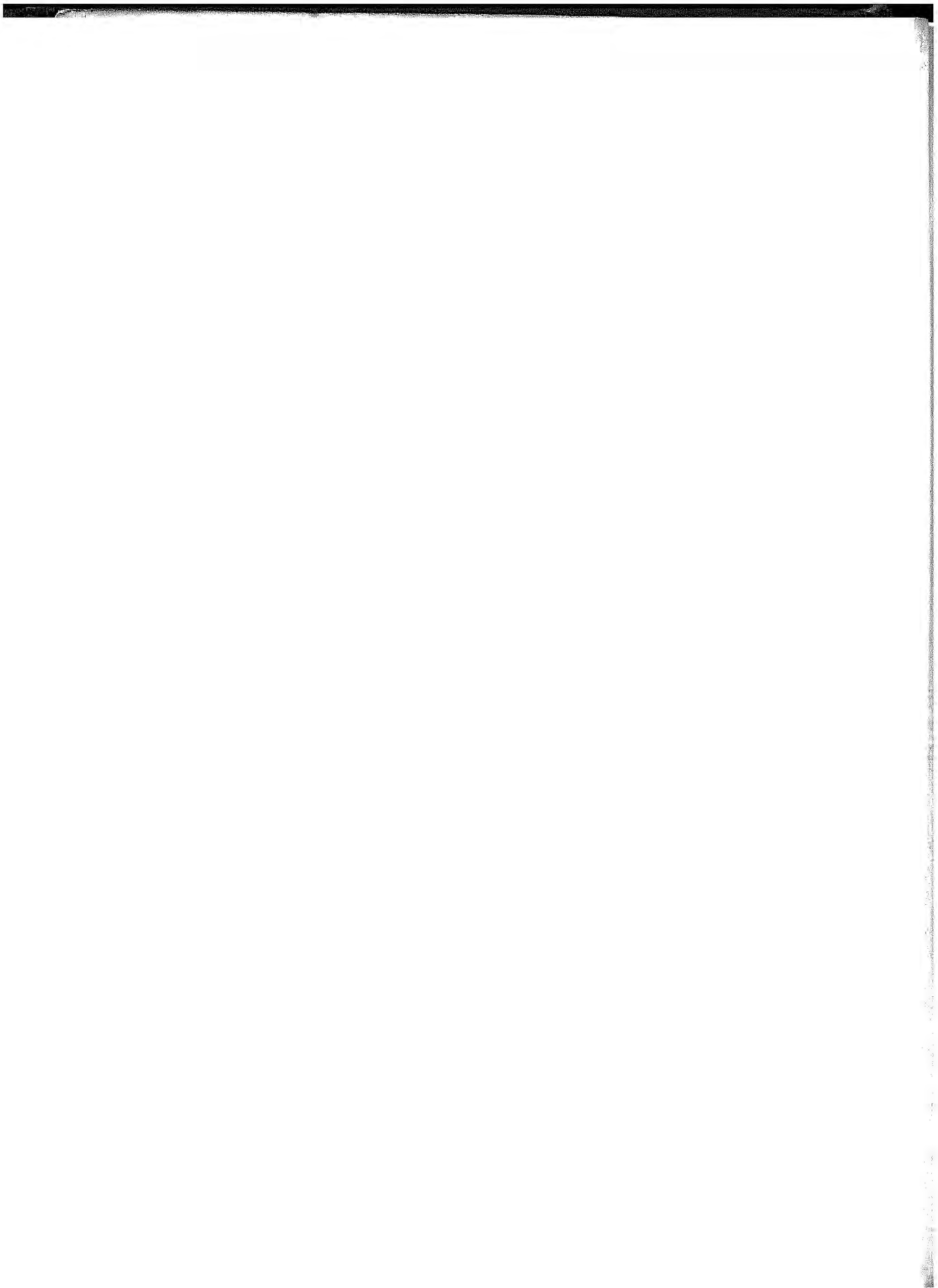
DOWN BY THE SUWANEE RIVER



DOWN BY THE
SUWANEE RIVER

BY
AUBREY HOPWOOD

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CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF ORANGEVILLE

IN the prehistoric days, before the great boom visited Florida to benefit the unscrupulous few at the expense of the credulous many, when the land was yet given over to the alligator and the mosquito, there existed in the southern portion of the State a clearing in the pine woods known as Porterstown.

The origin of the name is buried with its sponsor in obscurity and it is to be presumed that he made no further bid for fame, his solitary achievement being doubtless sufficient to content his simple soul. It was little enough to boast of.

The so-called town consisted in those days of a whisky saloon, a general merchant's store, a saw-mill, a dozen dilapidated shanties and a hotel. A disreputable barn-like structure was the latter, with faded green shutters on perilous hinges and a shamefully leaky shingle roof. Its proprietor had but little inducement to study the comfort of possible patrons, for with the occasional exception of a belated "drummer" on his rounds, or a drunken cowboy carried home from the saloon on speculation, nobody ever stayed there.

Immediately behind the building a large shed, dignified by the imposing title of livery stable, gave doubtful shelter to a couple of horses and a vicious mule. Their services were rarely required, for the horses had been lame from time immemorial, and the mule was scarcely safe to ride; nor could it be driven, because there was not enterprise enough in Porterstown to repair the solitary buckboard which it had kicked to pieces in an exuberance of spirits born of long idleness.

The place had its redeeming feature in the fact that it stood on the main line of the Citrus Belt Railroad and boasted a flag station. Intending passengers had but to take up a commanding position on the track and wave a white flag in front of the approaching train. If the engine-driver saw them, and was not in a hurry—an unusual combination of circumstances—he generally pulled up. And if not, they came again next day.

Now there are certain peculiar characteristics common to those who have in their hands the management of railways all the world over. And one of them is the humorous privilege of unexpectedly altering, every month or so, their advertised hours of arrival and departure. The ruling spirits of the Citrus Belt Railway were but human, and they delighted in the exercise of their prerogative.

So they ordained one evening that a goods train from their southern terminus should meet and pass a passenger train from their northern one at an un-

wanted hour on a siding in the immediate vicinity of Porterstown. The details of the arrangement would appear to have been left in a great measure to the discretion of the respective engine-drivers; and the responsible authority would, in a civilised country, have laid himself open to a prosecution for manslaughter.

For it chanced that the goods train was delayed upon its journey and the driver of the other grew tired of waiting. At the end of an hour he remarked to his mate that he "reckoned they'd got to chance it." Whereupon he crowded on full steam and dashed out for the next station. He never reached it, for his experiment resulted in the meeting of the two trains on a single line, and the consequence was a very pretty collision.

When they caught sight of one another the drivers of the locomotives reversed their respective engines, whistled "down brakes" and jumped clear. He of the goods train escaped with two broken ribs and a considerable shock to the system. The other alighted head foremost on a pine stump and broke his neck; which probably served him right.

At the moment of the collision there were but six passengers on the south-bound train. One of them, startled by the shrill whistling of the engine, sprang to his feet, hurried to the end of the car and threw open the door. He had not time to see much, but his

promptitude saved his life and laid the foundation of his fortune. He was a man who boasted that he never gave away a chance.

The terrific jar which followed threw him off his feet, and at the same moment, with a deafening crash of broken glass and splintering wood-work, the car settled over on its side.

For some moments the silence remained unbroken save for the hiss of escaping steam from the overturned engines. Then, from the wreck which had once been a gorgeously upholstered Pullman passenger car, there arose a thin column of blue smoke. The smouldering fragments of the lighted stove were preparing to put in their deadly work.

Meanwhile, around the corpse of the man who had succeeded in bringing about the accident, a small group had gathered. It consisted of a conductor, a brakeman, two firemen and the engine-driver with the broken ribs. Not one of them had escaped unscathed, and they were not pretty to look upon. For blasphemous profanity they did ample justice to the exigencies of the situation.

The last to join them was a tall man with an ugly wound on his forehead from which the blood still streamed copiously. His hands and face were badly scorched and he limped uncertainly in his walk. The brakeman was the first to notice his approach and hailed him.

"Hello! Come from the passenger car?"

The man nodded an affirmative, passing his hand meditatively over his bruised forehead.

"How many of you on board?"

"There *was* six."

The emphasis was terribly full of meaning.

A silence fell upon the little group, broken only by the groans of the injured engine-driver and the gentle sighing of the wind among the pine trees. Behind a distant cypress swamp the light faded and slowly died away in a gorgeous sunset of crimson and gold.

The man with the damaged head spoke again.

"No chance of getting her out of here to-night," he said musingly.

The remark scarcely called for an answer, but the conductor pointed with a grunt to the shattered bulk of the locomotives and the torn and twisted metals. The action was conclusive.

"How far do you make it to the nearest township?"

"It's most two miles from Porterstown."

"Is that so? Guess I'll walk in. Good-night."

And the group replied in chorus, "Good-night."

The man turned and walked pensively some twenty yards down the line with the air of one who revolves in his mind a weighty problem. He had just escaped with his life from a perilous situation and it was characteristic of him that the experience had failed to

unseat his life-long habit of cautious calculation. He paused and called to the conductor.

"You'll find another man up yonder under the dead pine-tree. I pulled him out when the car took fire."

"Is he alive?"

"No. Never knew what hurt him!"

He limped slowly away, and the others stood watching him until a curve in the track hid him from their view. Then they moved in the direction which he had indicated, to a spot where a motionless figure lay prone upon the short wire-grass under the skeleton arms of the dead pine tree. A turkey-buzzard circled slowly round on heavy wing and took up a watchful position amongst the topmost branches. But the man pursued his solitary way along the sandy track; stepping mechanically upon the wooden cross-ties.

From time to time he paused to wipe the blood from his forehead, carrying his hat in his hand that the cool evening breeze might play upon his face. It was ghastly pale, for the loss of blood had made him faint, but a look of sinister cunning lighted it the moment he found himself alone.

Two weary miles he tramped in solitude, his limbs stiffening rapidly as he walked. Shaken and bruised as he was, the journey seemed interminable, and nothing but his indomitable courage carried him through. When the flickering lights of the little town suddenly confronted him he sat down by the wayside with a

groan and wondered whether he was going to faint.

Five minutes later, when his head had ceased to swim and the mist had cleared away from his eyes, he crawled into the vestibule of the Porterstown Hotel. There he called for a bottle of the best brandy; and the proprietor, who served it in person, took mental note of him as he drank an undiluted half-tumbler of the fiery compound.

"You look pretty badly scared," he said.

The man laughed as he refilled his glass. The potent spirit had revived him.

"I am that!" he answered. "I've left a railroad collision and six dead men two miles up the track. It's a new kind of experience and it sort of gives a man a thirst."

He told his expected story curtly, without unnecessary detail, and the facts were dramatic enough of themselves. He had scarcely had time to collect himself, and it was not in his nature to be taken at a disadvantage. So he pleaded fatigue and ordered a bedroom; whither he shortly retired, taking his brandy bottle with him. Then he locked the door, and laying a thick leather pocket-book and a pistol under his pillow, turned into bed.

Perhaps it was the novelty of his surroundings that disturbed his rest, or the pain of his wounded head that precluded sleep, but all night long he tossed

restlessly from side to side, and the sun had scarcely risen next morning before he was dressed and astir. But in those few hours he had lived through a crisis in his life, and when he stepped into the solitary street at daybreak he was a different man.

He spent a very busy day, and before nightfall had made the acquaintance of every man in the town. He had made himself also acquainted with the average takings of the whisky saloon and the weekly business of the general merchant's store, jotted down a variety of notes in his pocket-book, and earned the goodwill of his new friends by unstinted generosity in the matter of liquid refreshment. That evening he contracted with the hotel proprietor for a month's board and lodging at reduced rates.

Two days later he presented himself at the Florida Office of the United States Land Department at Gainesville, and made sundry pertinent enquiries of the clerk in charge. Then he took up ten forty-acre lots of uncleared land at the States price of a dollar and a quarter per acre. He paid five hundred dollars in notes across the counter, and returned to Porterstown a landed proprietor. He had bought up the town.

Great was the consumption of rye-whisky in the local saloon that night when he made known the result of his negotiations.

"Call for anything you like, boys," he said to the little group which gathered round him. "They're my

drinks ! Silas G. Marks is my name, and I'm going to show you the biggest kind of a boom right here in Porterstown before the year's out."

And his hearers smiled, for the liquor was potent and their host to all appearance a man of affluence.

And they speedily discovered he was a man of action as well ; for, having taken the decisive step, he did not allow the grass to grow beneath his feet. He began by giving an extensive order to the proprietor of the local saw-mill, and the latter, with whom business had been very slack, executed it with a will. A two-story frame building was speedily erected and painted, after the immortal usage of Florida domiciles, a pleasant cream colour with a red roof and bright green shutters. Above its portal there appeared a gorgeous sign-board, bearing in portentous characters the following legend :

SILAS G. MARKS,
REAL ESTATE AGENT.

The country side flocked in to see the wondrous sight and to cement the newcomer's acquaintance. And the operation entailed much drink at his expense, so that the whisper went round that this must be a millionaire. In a fortnight his popularity was assured.

Then he took into his employ a small negro boy at a wage of two dollars a week ; and for many ensuing days the pair tramped the pine woods together, measuring out an immense number of yards and feet by means of

a chain decorated at intervals with little red tags. Here and there they paused to drive a wooden peg into the ground. And the boy marvelled, for he did not guess that he was laying the foundations of a city, but he wasted his wages in sugar-cane and cheap articles of gaudy apparel such as the negro soul loves.

Silas Marks spent many hours each evening burning the midnight oil in a kerosene lamp, on a plain deal table, engaged on the construction of a map of his lately acquired property. He evolved a model southern town whose broad avenues, running due north and south, were intersected at right angles by streets of subtlest nomenclature. It contained two churches, four hotels, an opera house, and an ice-factory.

It was about this time that the Northern newspapers began to hint to the world at large, by means of subtle advertisement and racy article, the advantages to be derived from the purchase of town lots in the thriving city of Orangeville. For Marks had decided to discard the plebeian name of Porterstown, and in the far south a collection of buildings takes brevet rank as a city from the moment it exists on paper, albeit the pine trees are growing still in its main street.

As if by magic the place began to boom. A doctor with a consumptive wife was the first arrival, and he set up a local practice and a chemist's shop. He called it a drug store.

Next there arrived a livery stable man, in whose

train shortly followed a blacksmith and a waggon builder. And Marks, who was beginning to see his way, entered busily into correspondence with sundry Philadelphia acquaintances, offering very special inducements to those who should decide to set up in business in the southern health resort. The bait took, and the general merchant noted with chagrin the opening of a rival establishment. Obviously it was his only policy to enlarge his premises and increase his stock, in order to keep abreast of the times. And Orangeville learned its first lesson in the advantages of competition.

In a small community it is wonderful how quickly a little vitality in trade makes itself felt. The local carpenter and the *employés* of the saw-mill naturally indemnified themselves for their unwonted exertions by liberal patronage of the whisky saloon. Its owner engaged a new bar-tender and set up a pool table.

The proprietor of the hotel, finding his rooms in demand, awoke to the scantiness of the accommodation at his disposal, and added a new wing and two coats of paint to his establishment. Shrewd speculators saw their chance and wrote up the orange-growing industry in glowing terms. And Silas Marks, with his finger on the pulse of public sentiment, entered upon his books every available orange grove within a radius of twenty miles.

The original investors in his town lots were far too shrewd to admit that the place scarcely came up to

their expectations. Disappointed themselves, they took their cue from their self-constituted leader and attracted their friends with specious promises of success. Then they sold them eligible building sites at advanced prices. And on every transaction a comfortable commission found its way into the capacious pockets of the real estate agent. His energy was indomitable and his suavity unsurpassed. Fortune had placed within his grasp the chance of a life-time and he intended to squeeze it to the uttermost dollar.

An enthusiastic young Englishman, on sport intent, travelling northwards from a successful fishing excursion amongst the monster tarpon on the Mexican Gulf Coast fell a very easy prey to his blandishments. He had a literary turn and went home to write a series of articles in a leading English newspaper on the future of the coming country. They were very interesting and very *couleur de rose*, and have since been the innocent means of misleading an incredible number of his credulous fellow-countrymen. For the author was young and wondrous enthusiastic, and he looked, after the manner of his kind, only on one side of the picture. For he knew absolutely nothing of the orange-growing industry except by hearsay.

He never dreamed of summer droughts and winter frosts ; of the dreary years of waiting while the young

trees slowly grow; of *scale*, of *rust*, of *foot-rot*, *die-back*, and the like; of the swindling misrepresentations of land agents; of the dishonesty of commission merchants; of unpaid mortgages and bogus title-deeds; of the deadly germs of malarial fever, and the subsequent hideous demoralisation which only the initiated can ever understand. So he played into Marks's hands and sounded Florida's praises across the Atlantic, where over-burdened fathers of families hailed with delight another outlet for impecunious younger sons.

And glowing accounts of the country's resources appeared in our daily papers, side by side with advertisements of wonderful bargains in orange groves; while people who should have known better circulated absurd stories of settlers who, starting with the proverbial shilling, had amassed phenomenal fortunes by methods more or less improbable. For many months it was difficult to meet with a self-respecting Englishman who had not a son, brother, cousin or nephew about to embark in the culture of the Florida orange.

The craze is over now. The sons, brothers, cousins and nephews have returned long since to the bosoms of their respective families; and they have not brought back the fortunes which it was confidently expected they would amass. They have not brought back anything; unless it be a chastened reverence for

English business methods, a predilection for rye-whisky, or the germs of a malarial fever.

But the thriving City of Orangeville stands to-day a monument to the genius of the man who did not scruple to make use of the opportunity which fortune unexpectedly placed within his grasp.

CHAPTER II

IN THE MOONLIGHT

"OH, Kitty, how heavenly this is! I never imagined anything half so lovely. It's just like a scene out of a play, only it's more perfect, because it's real. I've tried to picture it all to myself a hundred times, but it's better than anything I even hoped for."

The speaker lay at full length in a cushioned hammock, feasting her eyes on the scene of her enthusiasm; Florida at its best, seen in the meretricious witchery of a moonlight night in early autumn. A slender girl of seventeen, with the innocent face of a child and the graceful outline of budding womanhood, she made a very charming picture; the loosened masses of her brown hair framing the perfect oval of her girlish face, and the red lips parted in a sort of breathless smile which just revealed the gleaming line of her white teeth.

Her sister turned in her long chair and allowed her eyes to follow those of the enthusiast, trying to revive the old thrill which she too had felt when the first illusive novelty had held her in its subtle spell. And as she gazed, a little sigh escaped her, and there was

something almost pathetic in the hopeless gesture which she could not restrain. She realised that the glamour of the old days had gone beyond recall.

It was indeed a perfect night. Framed in by the foreground of the deep verandah with its wealth of honeysuckle and straggling wisteria, the moonlight shone upon a semi-tropical scene of indescribable beauty. A garden where roses, hibiscus, gardenias and parti-coloured oleanders ran riot in a mass of colour, sloped downwards with winding paths and trim Bermuda grass lawns to the shores of a lake half hidden by a fringe of surrounding willow oak and stunted cypress. In the shadow the glossy foliage of the orange trees shone almost black by contrast, their branches flecked here and there with the golden gleam of the rapidly ripening fruit.

The faint scent of magnolia hung upon the breath of the cool evening breeze with that subtle tropical fragrance which men who have breathed it never quite forget; and the myriad soothing sounds of Florida night-life stole pleasantly upon the ear. The subdued tinkle of a far-away cow-bell somewhere in the pine woods, the hoarse croak of a mighty bull-frog mellowed by the distance, the splash of a leaping fish as it left a phosphorescent circle of widening ripples on the water's otherwise unruffled surface, the gentle sigh of rustling leaves and the hum of insect life made up a delicate harmony to which the only discord was the sound of

men's voices as they talked in the lighted room behind. Kitty Luxmoore shuddered as she felt it. One of the voices was her husband's ; and her nerves, highly strung, resented the jarring note. She rose quickly from her chair and bent over her younger sister.

"May," she said, "would you like to go on the water? The boat is fastened by the pier, and they will never miss us if we slip out quietly."

The girl rose from the hammock and threw a light shawl over her shoulders.

"Oh, I should love it," she said. But she peered curiously into her sister's face, vaguely conscious of an intangible strangeness in her voice and manner.

Noiselessly they passed out of the shadows into the moonlit garden, stealing over the short grass between the flowering shrubs in breathless silence. A winding path led downwards to the water's edge where a wooden pier had been erected on cypress posts. To its extremity a little boat was chained, and Kitty Luxmoore drew it skilfully alongside.

"Jump in, dear," she said. "I'll take the oars."

The girl stepped lightly down and nestled in amongst the cushions in the stern ; while her sister deftly freed the little craft, and with half a dozen short strokes shot rapidly out into a streak of rippling moonlit water. For some moments neither spoke. Kitty drew a deep sigh of content.

"I love the water and the moonlight," she said.

"And oh, it's good to have you with me again, it seems centuries since I saw you last. Now tell me all about everything! What have you been doing since I married, and have things changed much at home? And I want to hear all about your journey, and what father thinks of the country, and how you like the idea of settling here and—heaps of things."

May Allison gave a little contented laugh, snuggling down amongst her cushions.

"One thing at a time," she said. "What have I been doing since you married? Well, I've been taking care of father, and housekeeping for him, and getting my accounts into horrible muddles, and looking forward to your letters. Then I've been longing to know how you and Tom were getting on, and what your home was like, and whether you like being married. Do you know, I think I'm a little afraid of Tom. He sometimes looks so grave and stern; and I had seen so little of him when he took you away. Father has a tremendously high opinion of his judgment though, and it was Tom who really persuaded him to come out. He's doing very well at the bank, isn't he?"

Kitty nodded, with just a shade of impatience. She took two or three quick little womanly strokes, digging her sculls deep into the water and jerking them out again. The action came from the arms and shoulders instead of the swing of her body. There was a faint trace of bitterness in her voice when she answered.

"Oh yes, he gets on very well. He ought to; he works hard enough. He goes to his wretched old bank at ten o'clock in the morning and stays there the whole day long. I never see a sign of him all day, and he goes to sleep in his chair after dinner while I'm playing the piano. Six days out of every seven I'm left to my own devices from morning till night, and—well, it is not exciting."

The petulant laugh with which she concluded did not ring quite true, nor did she meet her sister's eyes. May sat quite silent for a moment, her face very grave and wistful in the moonlight. The boat glided under the shadow of a clump of cypress; and she leaned forward, speaking almost in a whisper.

"Kitty, you and Tom—get on all right, don't you?"

Her sister looked into the pretty, eager face and a faint smile flitted over her own.

"Of course we do. We're a model married couple of three years' standing, very prosaic and sometimes deadly dull. Don't let us talk about that. Tell me all about your journey and what you think of New York. How did you like the passage across?"

"Oh, it was horrible, simply horrible." May gave a little shudder. "The day after we left Queenstown I thought I was going to die, and poor father was even worse! But they all declared it was not at all bad for the time of year; and by the time we got to New York father had photographed everybody on board and nearly

worried his steward to death about developers and dark rooms and things."

Both girls laughed. Their parent's unbounded enthusiasm for amateur photography had long been a standing family joke. The results were so invariably out of all proportion to the labour they entailed.

"Is he as bad as ever?"

"Worse. The number of plates he spoils is positively alarming. But he says he's going to work wonders out here and I had quite a long lecture about actinic rays in the train to-day. Kitty, I don't much like American trains. The way they mix up men and women in one Pullman car is really quite embarrassing. I was just going to sleep last night when I heard a tremendous scrambling outside my curtains. I peeped through and saw a very fat man clambering up the ladder into the top berth and he had taken half his clothes off. It's rather—a promiscuous arrangement, isn't it?"

Kitty laughed.

"You'll soon get used to the ways of the country; but I don't know that you will find them an improvement on our English ones," she said. "Did New York surprise you?"

"It's the funniest town I ever saw in my life and quite the untidiest. They have carriages with nigger coachmen, and horses with long tails, and they pave the streets with great cobble stones. Then they put bales and boxes all over the pavement and they call

Those dreadful, dreadful cobbles

it a *side walk*, and they charge you a dollar to go half a mile in a hansom and the drivers run into each other because nobody controls the traffic. Some of the shops are quite lovely, though, and the hotels have the most beautiful soft carpets. But oh, how hot they keep them and what a lot of iced water everybody drinks!"

Kitty laughed, pleased and amused at her sister's enthusiasm; though it suddenly seemed to intensify the three years' difference between them. For a woman ages very rapidly in Florida, even more so than outwardly appears.

"Beware of insular prejudice," she began with mock solemnity and suddenly broke off. "Look," she said, "do you see the lightning? It will keep on like that half the night."

May followed the direction of the uplifted arm. Away in the distance, behind a bank of greyish cloud, the lightning ran in little vivid streaks that seemed to chase each other outwards into the open violet of the sky, darting hither and thither in tiny flashes to which the night-haze gave an impression of softness that made them look more like mere reflections from a great dim mirror than a reality. A cloud sailed over the face of the moon and the boat drifted into a dark bank of shadow. A faint breeze ruffled the water's surface and died away, and for some moments the silence was intense.

Suddenly, out of the blackness on the shore, came

the sharp hoot of a great grey owl as it swooped across an open space and disappeared into the night.

The girl shivered, drawing her shawl tightly round her shoulders. Her face grew quite white and her lips, suddenly colourless, quivered slightly.

"Kitty," she said, "let us go back. That thing frightened me. It looked like an evil spirit."

The expression on her face and her awed voice frightened her sister. She turned the boat and pulled quickly out into the moonlight.

"You're tired, dear," she said. "I ought not to have brought you out after your long journey."

The boat shot back in the direction of the lighted house, leaving a tiny phosphorescent ripple in its wake, but May sat quite silent amongst her cushions until the little craft glided under the rush-covered bank and was made fast to the pier-head. Then she took her sister's arm and walked close to her side through the moonlit garden, and it was as though she fought against an overmastering weakness which she strove in vain to hide under a nervous little smile.

But when they came into the lamplight gleam of the verandah she paused and took Kitty's hands into her own, with a sudden half-appealing gesture.

"Kitty," she said, "I don't quite know what happened to me. But I feel as if I had passed quite suddenly out of my old life into a new one, and oh!—the future frightens me."

Her face was very white and drawn, and in her eyes was an ominous glisten. Kitty Luxmoore passed her arm tenderly about the slender waist, and kissed the cold cheek.

"I understand it, dear," she whispered. "There is a spell in these breathless moonlight nights that speaks to you in a language you never heard before. Some day you will learn to love it even as I love it now."

The younger girl looked wistfully into her sister's face and checked the words that rose to her lips. She could not understand; but a sudden longing to be alone was upon her.

They passed along the verandah and paused outside the open French windows of the dining-room. The light of a shaded lamp fell upon the faces of the two men who sat within.

The younger held a cigarette in one hand and pensively stroked a military moustache with the other. His well-bred features had a slightly care-worn look, intensified by the premature wrinkles about his eyes and mouth.

He was listening deferentially to his senior, who was talking enthusiastically in those important tones which men of small minds always use in exploiting their hobbies.

"A charming situation, my dear Tom, and so picturesque. You face north, you say. Then I shall take my first picture to-morrow, from the corner by

the mulberry tree. We shall get the morning light full upon the house and those pine trees will make a capital background. The proper lighting of the subject is one of the great essentials of photography, it is the point on which most amateurs fail. Now I have made a study of light and shade, and I can assure you"—He broke off suddenly as Luxmoore rose.

"Ah, here are the girls," he said.

CHAPTER III

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

LONG before the little household was astir next morning, May Allison awoke, rested and refreshed after a long night's sleep, with that pleasant sense of expectancy which lends so great a zest to the contemplation of new surroundings. Obeying a natural instinct she slipped into her dressing-gown and threw open her bedroom window. The cool morning breeze brought with it a pleasant scent of roses and honeysuckle and, leaning her elbows on the window sill, the girl inhaled its grateful fragrance whilst she feasted her eyes on the novel scene.

A faint mist hung over the lake below, waiting the magic touch of the rising sun to convert it into the heat haze of Florida noon. A mocking-bird, perched among the branches of an umbrella tree in the garden, was pouring out his little soul in a very ecstasy of bird-melody, and a gaudy black and yellow butterfly hovered among the blossom-laden branches of a pink oleander bush. Glistening dew-drops sparkled and shone upon the blades of the Bermuda grass lawns, converting into miniature gem-ropes the fragile fibres

of a spider's web amongst the climbing roses on the verandah posts. Nature was awakening in her softest mood, and already the girl was taking herself to task for her half-formed fears and fancies of the night before. Strangely unaccountable they seemed this morning in the altered conditions of daylight, and she laughed aloud as her eye rested on the little wooden pier where a small boat rocked gently on the water rippled by the early breeze.

Suddenly one of her quick impulses swayed her, urging her to go and inspect for herself this fairy kingdom which lay stretched below. Hastily dressing she stole quietly downstairs, and passed, a dainty little white-clad figure, into the garden. Hither and thither she wandered with a curious sense of freedom and exhilaration, drinking in new sights and sounds at every turn. She leaned upon the rail fence and watched a herd of cattle driven by a pair of cow-boys on lean wiry ponies until they disappeared among the pine trees with much cracking of stock whips and jangling of deep-toned bells. She made her way round to the stables and chatted with a bare-armed negro who did the honours with a gleam of ivory white teeth as he fed and watered his charges with all the elaborateness which his race are wont to display when under supervision. Then she returned to the garden and paused to inspect a miniature dog-kennel which she suddenly descried under the shade of a mulberry

tree, where a flock of tufted rice birds were making their morning meal.

The occupant was invisible; but a thin steel chain, affixed by a staple to a post firmly driven into the ground, swayed and quivered as with the motion of a living animal. May's curiosity was aroused, and she ventured a gentle pull, standing in readiness for immediate retreat. A small furry ball inside gently unwound itself as the little occupant awoke with a sleepy yawn to inspect his early visitor. Bending over at a respectful distance to peer into its retreat she was startled by a voice at her elbow. Her brother-in-law, returning from his morning swim, had approached unheard over the thick grass carpet.

"Good-morning, May," he said. "I didn't expect to find anyone up so early."

"I've been out for the last hour," she answered. "I couldn't stop indoors on such a lovely morning, and I want you to tell me such a lot of things. But first, what is this little beast? I think he's the dearest little chap I ever saw. He won't bite, will he?" She retreated quickly in response to a sudden movement on the part of the unknown.

Luxmoore laughed and seated himself on the grass beside the kennel. The furry ball resolved itself into a small racoon of softest coat and most impertinent face, the little beady eyes gleaming with an intelligence almost human.

"Oh no, he won't bite. He's what we call a 'coon,' and as tame as he can be. Watch him looking for his breakfast."

A small paw insinuated itself into the pocket of the speaker's coat; the wizened face puckered itself into a hundred wrinkles; and after a moment's search the tiny owner withdrew his monkey-like hand with the coveted morsel. Very solemnly he seated himself on his haunches, holding the sugar between his forepaws and daintily nibbling it. May laughed in delight.

"He looks like a little wee bear, and his face is about a thousand years old. Where did he come from, Tom, and can't you get another? I *must* have one like him."

For a moment Luxmoore's careworn face brightened. The girl's enthusiasm was infectious.

"I daresay Kitty will give him to you if you ask her," he said. "Would you like to take another turn round the garden before breakfast, or are you tired?"

"Tired?" laughed the girl. "Not a bit; I want to know the names of all these flowers; half of them I've never seen before."

Luxmoore rose from the grass and emptied his pockets; whereupon the little *gourmand* returned to the shelter of his domicile with his sugary store; and the two walked together down the winding path which the girl scarcely recognised as that which she and her sister had taken the night before. In the moonlight it

had seemed vaguely weird and mysterious, this morning all the world was aglow with life and brightness. So she spent a very happy half-hour over her first lesson in Florida botany ; and long before it had come to an end the pupil was conscious of a subtle link between herself and her tutor, who evinced a knowledge of his subject and a devotion to every individual plant and shrub which interested as much as it surprised her.

But she noticed, as they turned towards the house, that the careworn expression which had left it only for a few minutes had settled down again on her companion's face.

"You are very serious, Tom," she said brightly. "What are you thinking about?"

He stopped abruptly and faced her.

"I want to ask you a question, and I want you to be quite candid in your answer. It is nearly three years since you last saw Kitty. Do you think she has changed much?"

The question was unexpected, and, coming so closely on her own half-formed impression, slightly disconcerting. With a woman's quick instinct May parried it.

"How solemnly you said that," she laughed. "I thought you were going to ask something really important. I never saw Kitty looking better. Of course, she has changed a little, people always do when they marry," she continued naively, "but she only looks a little more—matronly."

Luxmoore stooped to pick a withered gardenia from a bush by his side, and plucked its petals apart with a sigh which did not escape his hearer as he answered.

"You don't know how much we have been looking forward to your coming out. I'm sometimes afraid that Kitty finds her life out here rather dull and monotonous, for I'm away all day at the Bank and she is left so much to herself. And yet I don't see how it is to be avoided. We are too far out of the world here to be able to expect much society or companionship, unless your father should decide to settle somewhere in the neighbourhood. That is what I am hoping for ; but I am rather afraid that Marks has other views."

"Who is Marks ? "

"A local celebrity and a land agent. You'll make his acquaintance this morning, for he's going to take you for a drive. He prides himself on being able to suit every Englishman who comes into the country with the exact class of property he requires, and, to do him justice, he succeeds far better than most of them. And he certainly deserves to, for he has made a study of the country and its resources, and he is always ready to take any amount of trouble."

"And who makes the money? The Englishmen or Marks? I thought American land agents were always swindlers."

Marks, must have made a good fortune. He was a clever fellow.
~~improbable~~

Luxmoore laughed. There was something which charmed him about the girlish earnestness with which she spoke.

"Not necessarily; though I admit they have a bad name. I believe thoroughly in Marks, otherwise I would not let your father have anything to do with him. Of course, he makes a commission on his sales, but that is only fair if he puts his client in the way of making a good thing."

"Yes, but are you quite sure it *is* a good thing? Do you know that I am beginning to get just a little sceptical about these fortunes we are all going to make."

Luxmoore looked at her a little curiously. "Why?" he asked.

"Don't laugh at me, Tom, and I'll tell you," she answered. "Coming over in the *Platonic* the captain asked me what part of America we were going to, and I told him. What do you think he said? 'I wonder what you all do down in Florida. I've taken hundreds of your countrymen out, but I don't bring many back. Do you die out there, or what becomes of you?' That wasn't encouraging, was it?"

"My dear child, you must not get these silly ideas into your head. The country is all undeveloped still, and the orange-growing industry is only in its infancy. But there are fortunes in it, if it is properly worked.

Are you disappointed in Florida, May; do you think you won't like it?"

The smile died out from the girl's face, leaving it very grave.

"I shall love it,—or hate it," she answered earnestly. "And I am wondering which."

"Oh, the first, I hope," said Luxmoore as they entered the house.

The breakfast-party which assembled in the little dining-room of the bungalow that morning was an unwontedly cheery one, for each of the quartet was in good spirits and there was much to be planned and discussed. But it did not escape May Allison that the presence of an outside element was obviously welcome both to Kitty Luxmoore and her husband. Woman-like she noted a score of details which her father, engrossed in a lecture on photography and the consumption of curried eggs, never even suspected. The meal was scarcely concluded when the sound of buggy wheels attracted the girl's attention and caused a diversion. In a moment she had sprung to her feet and was looking out of the window with a little exclamation of pleasure.

"What a smart pair of ponies," she cried. "Who is the man, Tom?"

"That is the great Marks himself."

"Oh, the honest land agent, is it? Well, he doesn't look as well-bred as his ponies, does he?"

In truth he did not, for the Mayor of Orangeville took far more pride in what he called his "team" than he did in his own personal appearance. And they probably repaid the attention infinitely better. They were showy little animals enough, sleek and well-groomed, though of the somewhat weedy type so common in the South; a peculiarity accentuated by flowing manes and tails, breast collars and American bearing-reins.

The girl looked them over with a critical air before she devoted a like attention to their owner. And Luxmoore, standing beside her, followed the direction of her eye and divined her unspoken thought.

"You're prejudiced against the man, May," he said in the somewhat dogmatic tones which his wife particularly disliked. "But it is a great mistake, the greatest mistake in the world, to form a judgment on insufficient premises. When you know him as well as I do, you will change your mind."

May shook her head.

"I think not," she answered.

Meanwhile the man under discussion had leisurely descended from his buggy and loosened his bearing-reins, afterwards affixing the bridle of the near-side pony by means of a chain to the ubiquitous "hitching-post" which Florida hosts invariably provide for the convenience of their visitors.

He was a man of about forty; tall, ~~thin~~ and loose-

C

fat

jointed, with a clean-shaved upper lip and an ill-trimmed brown beard, which was an artistic mistake in that it served to give prominence to a crafty mouth, much better hidden. His eyes were small and set too close together, but they were singularly bright and piercing. A clever physiognomist would have summed him up as an unscrupulous man who had risen, by the exercise of doubtful talents, superior to the vicissitudes of his earlier years. But, happily for Marks, clever physiognomists are comparatively rare.

To do him justice he played his *rôle* very fairly well, smiling pleasantly enough in answer to Luxmoore's greeting and taking off his hat with a somewhat exaggerated politeness in response to his introduction.

"Mr Allison, Miss Allison, I'm pleased to meet you both, and I hope we shall soon get better acquainted. I'm to have the pleasure of driving you around and I don't doubt but we shall find you a right pleasant location either hereabouts or maybe in the English colony at Orangeville. I guess you'll be going up to the Bank, Captain, but I hope Mrs Luxmoore will come with us. There's room enough for four in the buggy and I've fixed up a little light lunch, so we'll have no need to hurry."

His voice was slightly high-pitched, and the nasal intonation decidedly marked; but, with the exception of an occasional lapse into the vernacular of his earlier years, he had acquired the conversational tone and

polish of the cultured American with tolerable success. He was a man who had every trick of his profession at his finger ends, and it was his boast that he never threw away a chance.

The programme of his proposing was speedily carried into effect. Five minutes were spent in persuading the enthusiastic Allison that his camera must be left at home, and ten more devoted by his daughters to the mystery of "putting on their things." By the time the impatient ponies had pawed a couple of two-foot graves in the yielding sand everything was in readiness, and May took her seat beside the driver, whilst Kitty and her father ensconced themselves behind.

The girl found the drive an extremely interesting one, for there is a subtle charm about the first introduction to new surroundings which serves even to idealise the hideous monotony of Florida's pine woods. Years afterwards, when the novelty has long since worn away, you may look back in blank wonderment upon those first impressions and, from the dead level of an aimless existence, marvel at the recollection of your early enthusiasm. But whilst it lasts there is an undoubted element of fascination about that first glimpse of the unknown.

The day was gloriously fine and the ponies in the very pink of condition, and May, noting with a shrewdly critical eye the methods of her charioteer, marvelled at

his knowledge of topography and the skill which he displayed in saving his frail hickory buggy-wheels from demolition amongst the tortuous stump-strewn tracks which he affected as short cuts.

He drove in typical Southern manner; a rein in each hand, thumbs uppermost, working from the elbow as a tyro works the rudder lines of the small boats which urge their perilous career between Molesey Lock and Tagg's Island on summer Sunday afternoons. But his efforts were crowned with far greater success, and he chatted incessantly with supreme confidence in his own powers.

For Marks had made it his study to present to his victims the brightest colours of the picture which his imagination painted for them, and his quick wit had sufficiently gauged the English temperament to enable him to appeal to it very successfully. On occasion he could talk well and fluently on matters of which they were necessarily ignorant, and that which was usually the mere routine of his business became to-day a positive pleasure in the company of the bright English girl at his side. In the course of their drive he pointed out the beauties and resources of some half-dozen orange groves, each of which he felt convinced would suit Mr Allison exactly. Nor was he in any wise disconcerted by May's leading questions,—indeed he rather appreciated the shrewdness which put him upon his mettle.

"But if these properties are all as valuable as you say, Mr Marks," she remarked, "I can't understand why the people they belong to should want to sell them at all."

The land agent smiled affably, flicking an obtrusive horse-fly from the flank of his off-side pony.

"There is the great difference between your countrymen and mine," he answered. "An Englishman wants to hold on to his own homestead, and an American is always ready to turn over his capital. Maybe he needs change, maybe he wants to clear off a small mortgage, or again maybe he thinks he could do more business in some other locality. So he is content to make a small profit on his investment and start out afresh. You can't understand that as yet, but you will before you have lived a great while down South."

And the answer seemed plausible enough.

It was late in the afternoon before the ponies' heads were turned towards home, and a prettily situated little grove caught the artistic eye of the amateur photographer. The land agent, who boasted that he never missed the opportunity for a deal, made good his assertion by promptly appealing to a sense of which he understood nothing whatever. He turned out of his direct road and alighted to open the heavy gate in the wooden fence, pulling up a moment later at the door of a small frame house. In answer to his hail, the owner, a typical specimen of the Southern settler,

lounge up from the direction of the stables, followed at a short distance by a younger man leading a ragged-hipped pony. Something in his appearance attracted May Allison's attention.

He was a tall man whose clean-shaved face gave no index to his age, but conveyed an impression of strength and determination. He had a curiously weary well-bred air as he came leisurely towards them, a cigarette in his mouth and the rein of his pony's bridle looped over his arm. His attire resembled that of the typical cowboy of Wild West Shows, with a subtle difference which the girl's eye was quick to note. There was a neatness about the well-fitting riding boots, an easy bearing of the shapely head under its broad-brimmed sombrero, and an unmistakable English stamp about his whole attitude which threw him up in strong contrast to his surroundings. He nodded carelessly to Marks, who was already deep in conversation with the owner of the estate, and took off his hat to Kitty Luxmoore with the quiet assurance of an old friend.

"You haven't seen any of my boys going through with a drove of cattle?" he asked. "I expected to have met them between here and Maryville, but I've missed their track."

Marks broke off his conversation abruptly to reply.

"We passed them half an hour ago heading south.

Jake Summers and three more. Is that the crowd you're looking for?"

"Yes," was the reply, as the speaker swung himself into the saddle. "They've made better time than I expected."

He gathered up his reins and turned his pony's head in the direction of Marks's pointed whip, but his host called after him.

"There's no gate down yonder, Jim; you'll need to go around."

"All right, old man," was the reply. "We'll get over if we can't get through."

He took off his broad-brimmed hat and cantered leisurely away.

Twenty yards from the tall, ragged snake-fence he gathered his pony together and drove him straight at the obstacle. Despite the heavy sand on the take-off side, the game little animal rose at it like a deer, and got over with a protesting rap of one hind foot.

"That's the smartest horseman in the State," remarked the old settler, as the rider disappeared among the pine trees, in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"And the most reckless," added Kitty Luxmoore.

Marks shook his head.

"He'll break his neck one of these days," he muttered between his teeth. "And it won't be much loss anyhow," he added grimly.

But he strongly resented May Allison's silence during

their homeward drive ; for he was shrewd enough to know that a woman, and especially a young one, forms her impressions of a man at their first meeting and very rarely changes them.

And he realised that Jim Scott had him at a disadvantage.

CHAPTER IV

JIM SCOTT, COWBOY

MUCH to Kitty Luxmoore's disgust, and the more so because her husband had nothing but praise for the selection, it was the English colony at Orangeville which finally attracted John Allison's unstable fancy and provided himself and May with a temporary habitation.

In the first place, she was indignant that, with innumerable properties to select from, he should have chosen one situated forty sandy miles from her own home; and in the second, she was rather jealous of her sister. For the much-advertised colony was the centre of Florida's English society, such as it is. It boasted a bachelor community, and a club house where fancy dress balls might be given, a polo ground where tea and scandal were to be discussed, and a race-course where new gowns could be exhibited and criticised. And these things have attractions for the young married woman who sojourns in foreign lands of which her untravelled sisters can form no estimate.

Silas Marks was jubilant in the extreme; possibly because his commission was an unusually high one,

or possibly from ulterior motives. In any case the purchase was duly recorded in the columns of the *Orangeville Reporter*, and a paragraph of welcome to the newcomers which followed the announcement would have been of greater value and in better taste if the editor of that enterprising journal had been any other than the land agent himself.

There was little fault to be found with the property, except on the score of price. Of that, the less said the better, for in those days the boom was still at its height and the all-levelling doctrine of supply and demand had not as yet asserted itself. Years afterwards the pendulum swung to the other extreme, and to-day property may be purchased at something like its fair value, which is not a high one. But the place had several undoubted advantages in addition to the picturesqueness which probably attracted its purchaser.

In the first place it was situated within a couple of miles of a thriving city and consequently in touch with civilisation by means of the Citrus Belt Railway. And this is a point not to be overlooked by those whose income is dependent on the transport of a very perishable crop.

The railway station at Orangeville is a stroke of genius on the part of its architect and originator, for the miniature forest of palms and banana plants which ornament its platform have rested the eye and attracted

the attention of many a travel-stained tourist. A land agent's buggy will convey him in less than half an hour into the heart of the English colony, and skirting the polo ground he will come upon a dainty little orange grove, enclosed by a white-washed fence, which was recently the property of the worthy Allison. A pretty little frame house, overgrown by wisteria and honeysuckle and surrounded by oleanders and hibiscus bushes, stands well back from the road and commands a clear water lake of perhaps half a mile in diameter; whilst twenty acres of thrifty young orange trees form a pleasant and conceivably lucrative background to the whole. In the matter of stabling and packing-sheds nothing could be better arranged; the lake is noted for its excellent fishing, and a pretty little structure on its bank is admirably adapted for its double purpose of bathing and boat house. An application to any land agent in the country will convince the sceptic on each and all of these points!

For some months the novelty of her surroundings and the freedom of her new mode of life were very charming to May Allison. There was so much to be done in the way of furnishing the house, fitting up a dark room for her father's use, making the acquaintance of her neighbours and learning the mysteries of Florida house-keeping that the girl found herself occupied from morning till night. Then, in due course, came the inevitable reaction.

Beyond its own immediate and petty concerns, of little interest to a newcomer, the English community was not particularly attractive. Its female element was chiefly given to the discussion of small local scandals, whilst the men showed an alarming propensity to make love to her, which amused May almost as much as it annoyed her. From time immemorial it has been the glorious privilege of the young settler to lay his mortgaged orange grove and his susceptible heart at the feet of any good-looking English girl who may sojourn in his vicinity. Possibly the climate is in a measure responsible for his proclivity, or perhaps he really longs for a companion to share his exile. In either case the tale of unhappy marriages is a long and very sad one.

In matters of housekeeping again, the first amusing novelty soon wears off. When you have discovered that fresh mutton is only to be purchased once a week, and that beef is obtained by the primitive method of chasing a heated bullock into a slaughter house for immediate butchery, you cease to marvel at the toughness of the local fare. A few weeks will suffice to initiate you into the habits of the red ants and cockroaches which will surely infest your kitchen, and you will learn to discount the ravages of the former by placing the legs of your meat safe in saucers of paraffin oil, and to decimate the latter by a diet of cucumber peel sprinkled with powdered borax. You

will discover how to slip under a mosquito curtain in such a way as to leave no available crevice for your enemy's entrance, and how to distinguish between the harmless black snake and the dread mocassin which inhabit the shores of your lake.

All these things May Allison learned, and she further assisted her father to develop and print a large number of very indifferent photographs. The enthusiast's efforts rarely met with the success which his perseverance undoubtedly deserved. Some unexpected *contretemps* invariably cropped up to mar the perfect picture on which he invariably counted. It was found that he had used the wrong stop, over-exposed his plate, or allotted two negatives to it by mistake. One of those hundred little difficulties which beset the path of the unwary amateur met him at every turn.

Meanwhile the crop upon his orange trees was rapidly coming to maturity, and in vain his daughter urged upon him the necessity of giving it his undivided attention, pointing out that on its proper disposal depended their hoped-for income. It was mere waste of time. True, he made an occasional spasmodic effort to learn the rudiments of orange culture and discussed questions of pruning and chemical fertilisers with his new acquaintances, but one and all of them had pet theories of their own and each man's views were diametrically opposed to those of his neighbour.

And in the result the working of the place, which

really requires a master mind, was left almost entirely to the vagaries of a couple of negroes who had been employed on Marks's recommendation. These worthies were by no means slow to profit by their master's inexperience, and succeeded for a time in doing less work and earning higher wages than the most unprincipled white man would have been capable of attempting. And so three months went by.

It was a lovely evening towards the end of December, and May Allison stood alone at the little gate in the whitewashed fence, wondering rather wearily whether the whole thing had not been a failure. The day had been a hot and trying one, as even December days can be in semi-tropical climates, and the girl was suffering from that languor which so often attends the process of acclimatisation. Everything seemed rather objectless, and she longed for congenial companionship. Sadly she reflected that forty miles of sand and pine trees divided her from her sister almost as effectually as three thousand miles of blue Atlantic had done, and for the first time the hideous monotony of an exile's life forced itself upon her. Listlessly she took in the sights and sounds which a few months ago had contained all the charm of novelty for her. A gang of negroes at work on a clearing across the road were trooping off to the local store, having set their stump-fires gaily burning. She listened to their hearty laughter and sighed. She watched a bull-bat soar upwards

and upwards in diminishing circles until he became a small speck in the blue above, then close his wings and swoop downwards with his strange hoarse croak, to repeat his performance with monotonous regularity a hundred yards further on.

Suddenly, an unwonted sound reached her ear, and waiting idly to see whence it came, her face brightened and her expression changed as if by magic.

And yet it was only an old song which had struck a responsive chord in her susceptible nature. Only an old song; but sung as she had never heard it before, in a big baritone voice, clear and true, with a strange ring of pathos in it which somehow blended exactly with her mood and awoke a curious thrilling interest as to the singer's personality—

*"Way down upon the Suwanee River
Far, far away,
There's where my heart is turning ever,
There's where the old folks stay."*

Nearer and nearer it came, while the girl stood suddenly spell-bound, drinking in each note with a curious fascination which rooted her to the spot.

The singer rounded a turn in the avenue of pine trees, and at the first glance May recognised him. It was the tall cowboy who had attracted her interest because a land agent had abused him, who looked like an English gentleman and affected the garb of a Florida cowboy. Dressed, as before, in riding breeches

and long dusty boots, with a broad-brimmed hat on the back of his head, and a flannel shirt open at the throat, he walked easily towards her, with one arm resting on his pony's neck, singing as though his whole soul were in the melody and his thoughts a thousand miles away.

*"All the world am sad and dreary
Everywhere I roam,
Say, darkies, how my heart grows weary
Far from the old folks at home."*

He was abreast of the gate before he noticed her, and suddenly broke off his song. He paused and took off his hat with a little smile, absolutely unself-conscious and quite at his ease.

"Miss Allison, I think," he said quietly. The girl bowed, whilst the warm blood rushed to her cheeks, but she could not speak. A strange spell was upon her.

He noted her shyness, though he did not understand it, and with instinctive delicacy he went on speaking lightly, easily, without meeting her eye until she had recovered her self-possession.

"Your sister, Mrs Luxmoore, is an old friend of mine, and I promised her long ago that I would come and call on you the first time I was on this side of the country, but the last few months have been my busiest time. I'm only here to-day by accident, for my pony put his foot in a gopher-hole and got a fall that has rather shaken him. I don't suppose you know what a

gopher-hole is, but it has given me a five-mile walk on my way to Orangeville, and this poor little chap has had a long day of it already." He patted the pony's neck affectionately. "I wonder whether you will be very kind, Miss Allison, and let me put him in your stable for half an hour. I should like to make your father's acquaintance."

The girl assented readily, his pleasant voice and assured manner putting her entirely at her ease and dispelling her unwonted shyness as rapidly as it had sprung up.

"Please come in and give him a rest," she said. "My father is in the house and he will be so glad to see you."

"Thank you very much," he answered simply, as he opened the gate; and May noticed that the pony, unled, followed him like a dog.

"I don't think I've introduced myself," he continued, as they walked towards the house. "My name is Jim Scott."

She looked up with a little quick smile.

"I know you quite well by name," she answered. "Kitty has often spoken about you. And it is not the first time we have met. Do you remember jumping your pony over a wooden fence one afternoon in September, because it was the shortest way to catch Jake Summers on his way from Maryville?"

The cowboy laughed. "You have a very good memory," he said.

"You have a very good pony," she answered readily. "And I should have known him anywhere, even if I had not recognised you."

"You like horses, then?"

"I love them," she answered.

He met the bright smile with which she turned towards him, and it struck him on a sudden that she was singularly pretty. Only his eyes showed it, for his face grew grave and rather stern. But the girl knew.

They found John Allison pacing the verandah, preparatory to supper. He had spent the afternoon in the confined atmosphere of his dark room, and the result of his labours had disheartened him. He greeted the newcomer enthusiastically, insisting that the pony and its owner were both in need of food.

"And so you must stay for supper," he said. "And we will take a turn round the grove while May superintends the kitchen arrangements." And the girl hurried off, with all the importance of the young housekeeper whose resources are unexpectedly taxed, while the cowboy followed his host to the stables.

He quietly put aside the services of the officious negroes, and personally unsaddled and fed his mount, before he lighted the inevitable cigarette and accompanied his new acquaintance on a tour of inspection.

Talking easily on a dozen different subjects, he scarcely appeared to notice the ostensible object of their round, and John Allison never suspected that his keen eye had taken in at a glance every detail of trees and crop alike, until they had returned to the house.

"And what do you think of my place?" asked the owner, waiting in vain for a voluntary comment.

"Your trees want pruning badly," was the leisurely reply, "and I don't remember ever to have seen worse ploughing; but the crop ought to be worth at least a thousand dollars. Have you sold it?"

"No, I have not; and to tell you the truth I don't quite know how to set about it. The advice one receives is so contradictory, and I really cannot make up my mind whether to sell at once or hold on for higher prices."

He spoke with the air of one who has given his subject deep and constant thought; and May, standing on the verandah in a pretty white tea-gown, laughed merrily.

"Father is quite hopeless, Mr Scott," she said. "Can't you give him some really practical advice?"

The cowboy blew a meditative smoke ring as he turned towards her.

"I could, but he wouldn't act on it," he answered.

"Oh yes, he would; I'll promise to make him."

"You will promise?"

"Yes, I'll promise. What is he to do?"

"Sell the crop to-morrow without another moment's delay. Have nothing whatever to do with the packing, and make the purchaser take all risks."

May laughed again.

"And what about the price?"

"A cent apiece on the trees."

"That is all very well, but where is the purchaser to come from?"

"I will send you one to-morrow."

John Allison looked at the speaker and then turned towards his daughter. Both knew that the offer was an exceptional one, and the quiet impressiveness of the man's manner had its effect.

"You really mean it?" said Allison.

The cowboy raised his eyebrows with a little smile.

"Certainly," he answered.

And he clinched the matter in his usual characteristic fashion, for no sooner had they finished supper than he drew up a contract in due form, making himself personally responsible for the purchase; and May, signing it in the character of witness, exulted over the ready solution of a problem which had caused her so much anxiety. Her gratitude increased the interest which she had felt already in a personality which attracted her from its unlikeness to its surroundings.

Jim Scott looked at his watch. "I had no idea the time had gone so fast," he said, "and I have a dozen

things to settle in Orangeville to-night. May I get my pony?"

But John Allison would not hear of it. He was as full of gratitude as his daughter, appreciating strength of character and readiness in action as only the unpractical really do. Already he was taking to himself much credit for the business-like way in which he had completed the transaction. He pressed his guest to remain all night, or at least to wait until the moon was up.

"Come into the drawing-room," he said, "and May shall sing us a song. That is, if you care about music."

The cowboy acquiesced with an alacrity which the girl did not fail to note.

"Care about it," he answered; "it is one of the few things in the world I do care about."

She sang that night as a girl can only sing when she knows intuitively that she is *en rapport* with her listener. That subtle sympathy which criticises even whilst it appreciates, which appreciates *because* it criticises, serves to arouse in impressionable natures the very main-spring of effort. It is the same electric mesmerism which tells the actor that he has appealed to his audience, and which nerves him to excel himself.

Her voice was true and very sweet, atoning for lack of training by the spontaneous expression which is beyond all mechanical teaching. And the songs she

chose, simple and unmarred by any striving after effect, harmonised so exactly with her own nature that even her father, drumming with his fingers on the arm of a chair, realised their charm. He smiled with a pleased air of proprietorship when she rose from the piano, and Scott thanked her with an earnestness so obvious as to preclude all idea of compliment.

"I can't tell you what pleasure you have given me," he said. "It is years since I have heard anyone sing like that."

"It is your turn now," she said, as she made way for him. "I know you can sing, for I heard you this afternoon."

And as their eyes met she felt the warm blood rising to her face, and almost wondered that no feeling of shyness came with it now.

He took the seat she had vacated without a word, and the weary little smile which had left it only for a few minutes, settled down again upon his face.

His strong fingers ran over the keys with a lightness of touch which surprised her, and it seemed that the melody into which the chords melted came without the player's volition, almost against his inclination.

It was Lassen's *Aller Seelen* which he played, and the well-known air seemed to the girl to have suddenly acquired a strange new meaning as she listened. He

sang it in the German original, with the same vibrating pathos which had given so unwonted a charm to the old-fashioned negro melody which haunted her still. The tears stood in May's eyes as the strong voice died away on the simple refrain,

*Wie einst in Mai,
Wie einst in Mai.*

Once more he ran his fingers over the keys, the lingering chords melting away in melodious harmony, and suddenly he rose to his feet.

"Look," he said, "the moon has been up for half an hour, and it is time for me to go."

They went with him to the stable and watched him saddle the pony, and they all walked together as far as the little white gate. There he paused and bid them good-night, turning first to Allison.

"My man will be here to-morrow," he said, "and you will have no further trouble about the fruit. All you need do is to check the numbers and draw the money."

He held out his hand to May.

"Good-night, and thank you for your music. It has been a very real pleasure to me, and I shall look forward to hearing you sing again."

Ten minutes later the girl stood at the window of her room and listened. Through the silence of the night, mellowed by distance, but clear and distinct

across the intervening lake, came back the old refrain,

*"All the world am sad and dreary
Everywhere I roam,
Say, darkies, don't your hearts grow weary
Far from the old folks at home."*

The singer's voice died away into silence, and the girl shut down the window with a sigh which was almost a sob.

CHAPTER V

IN THE ENGLISH COLONY

ON the subject of emigration there are many popular fallacies.

One of the most common is that which supposes that a young Englishman of good birth and expensive education is more likely to succeed in an uncivilised country than he is at home. As a rule his solitary qualification is a hazy idea that Nature has specially equipped him for the process known as "roughing it." And his friends supplement the equipment with a first-class passage and an unnecessary outfit. Great stress is laid upon the outfit, which always includes a supply of flannel shirts, a pair of long brown riding boots, and a revolver.

In ninety-seven cases out of every hundred the result is a failure. In the other three the experimentalist is gifted with peculiar abilities, exceptional luck, or the means of commanding capital and influence. And in each of these instances he would have succeeded just as well, if not very much better, had he remained in England.

The plan, on the other hand, has its undoubted

advantages. It seems obviously essential that an overpopulated hive should provide some sort of outlet for its superfluous drones, and the system of placing several thousand miles of blue sea between them and their families has one undoubted recommendation at least. It is improbable in the extreme that they will ever earn sufficient money to bring them back. And if they do they are generally worth welcoming. It is doubtful whether the practice tends to increase our *prestige* as a nation abroad, but the fault of course lies with the samples and not with those who export them.

When an all-seeing Providence, selecting Silas Marks as her instrument, saw fit to found the English colony at Orangeville, the male material with which she worked was recruited for the most part from the ranks of these predestined failures. With that grim humour which rarely deserts her she added a female element for the purpose of breeding discord and other things, and left Nature to take its course. The net result blossomed in due season into a community of such exceptional pettiness and small-mindedness that it will pass into history by the clumsy title of "the English colony at Orangeville," simply because its component parts were never able to agree upon a suitable name for it.

To Silas Marks, once the title deeds were signed and his commission duly lodged in the bank, it was a matter of profound indifference what became of the original purchasers. They were merely the pieces with which

he had to deal in working out the combinations of his game, and they very rarely succeeded in presenting a problem of sufficient interest to exercise his ingenuity.

If they prospered and had a crop to sell, the probability was that they would attract their friends. That meant further commissions. If they failed, as indeed they usually did, he was ever at hand to advance money on a first mortgage at exorbitant interest. And that meant that he would ultimately have an opportunity of re-selling the property at an enormous profit. There was little else that they could do.

But of late he had begun to detect a certain hostile influence at work which annoyed him the more in that it wounded his pride. Despite his affluence and the authority to which his position entitled him, there had arisen a more popular than he, and that in the colony of his own founding. Once or twice, on a small scale indeed, but none the less decisively, his schemes had been frustrated and himself checkmated by a man whom he could have bought up twenty times over, who prided himself on being nothing more nor less than a Florida cowboy.

How and why Jim Scott had drifted into his present profession were questions which the warmest of his admirers would have been puzzled to answer. Standing six foot one in his riding boots, with a lean wiry frame designed by Nature to withstand an inordinate amount of fatigue, he towered mentally and physically

a head and shoulders above the small army of cowboys who were ever at his beck and call. The very thoroughness with which he had mastered his profession served to accentuate the difference between himself and his colleagues.

The subtle characteristics which differentiated between Jim Scott and his imitators were far too elusive for analysis or classification, wherefore they were specially noticeable to the observant eye of a woman, ever susceptible to detail. The easy hang of his clothes, however rough and well-worn; a certain assurance of bearing which contrasted vividly with the mistaken ease of the underbred; a curious delicacy in the handling of anything he touched, from the cigarettes he invariably smoked to the reins of a bucking pony, were amongst the little peculiarities which distinguished him in any company. He was equally at home and equally welcome in a Florida drawing-room or a cowboy's hut, though his predilection was probably for the latter.

Men who had once worked with him were ever ready to take another job, for if the discipline was severe the pay was high and regular, and once the allotted task had been carried through, his camp was the cheeriest that the soul of Southern cowboy could desire. Their leader was game to drink, gamble, smoke or sing until any hour in the morning, but his authority remained supreme. He would strike his camp next day with

military precision, intolerant of any excuse or delay on the part of a less-seasoned vessel whose midnight excesses had told their tale.

And yet the sum total of their knowledge of him amounted to very little. They could have told you that he was an Englishman by birth, and a man whom it was unwise in the extreme to fall foul of and absolutely hopeless to question. They knew that he had a very comfortable balance in the State Bank at Jacksonville, that he owned a mysterious property somewhere in the South, to which he referred as "my homestead," and which none of them had ever visited. It was popularly supposed to be situated in the vicinity of the Everglades, and the legend ran that the wandering Seminole Indians treated him with a deference which their own chief would have been proud to command. It was further believed that he was engaged in the breeding of cattle and ponies on a very large scale, and it was known that he was in the habit of disappearing—sometimes for two or three months at a spell—to the solitude of his estate. Then his customary haunts knew him no more until the whisper went round that Jim Scott had a mob of cattle to be driven north or a herd of ponies for sale. On these occasions the competition to be numbered amongst his assistants was very keen in the cowboy community.

To a man of Silas Marks's temperament, the very sight of him acted as does the proverbial red rag to the

bull. Although their interests had never directly clashed on a matter of special importance to either, each one felt that there lurked beneath the velvet glove of the other's civility the steel hand which would not hesitate to strike in earnest when the inevitable occasion arose. And they watched each other carefully, as practised duellists take the measure of a possible opponent, and note each point of strength and weakness in his attack and defence.

To the observant members of the scandal-loving English colony it soon became evident that Jim Scott's growing interest in the Allison *ménage* was by no means to the land agent's taste. In a hundred pretty ways he showed it, not openly indeed, but by subtle hint and innuendo. He went so far as to warn John Allison, whom he frequently visited, against the cowboy's influence. But herein he made a mistake, for Allison was strongly prepossessed in favour of the man whose prompt action had secured a speedy and lucrative sale for his crop, and encouraged rather than otherwise the growing friendship which was the natural outcome of his daughter's first meeting with Jim Scott. The latter soon became a regular and frequent visitor whenever his business led him into the district, and his readiness and resource were the exact qualities calculated to appeal to the man who was entirely wanting in both.

Professing, as he did, an utter disbelief in orange

culture as a lucrative profession, he appeared to know fully as much about it in practice as others did in theory. He persuaded John Allison to dismiss the negroes who had been robbing him right and left, and he personally instructed their successors in the arts of pruning and ploughing, taking his turn with equal ease and assurance behind the plodding mule or amongst the thorny branches. He knew the cheapest markets for the purchase of chemical fertilisers and forage, and was an adept at "cutting" freight rates to a minimum. In the mysteries of housekeeping May found him an invaluable ally, and she marvelled at his knowledge of things culinary. When she asked him how he had attained it, he answered with his customary quiet smile—

"I once camped for six months in the backwoods entirely alone. When your supplies depend upon your own gun, and your dinner on your own cooking, you pick up a number of little wrinkles. It's capital practice."

The intimacy between the two naturally grew apace, for it is a peculiarity of this semi-tropical climate that it can foster the flower of friendship, or indeed the rank weed of passion, with the same extraordinary celerity which is displayed by its indigenous plant life. In a space of time which would, amongst other surroundings, have appeared incredibly short, the girl's interest in her new companion had ripened into something

deeper, something which she only vaguely understood.

His personality impressed her as much as his impassiveness piqued her, and the contrast to the Florida failures of sapped energies who constitute our representatives in the misnamed Land of Flowers was very strongly in his favour. It was his habit to treat her always as a mere child, and the intuitive knowledge that she was one no longer was May's first concession to the subtle spell of a country which teaches a woman to feel and to understand very many things hitherto unsuspected.

On the girl's eighteenth birthday, the cowboy made her a present of a handsome black pony, bred and broken by himself; whereat the tongue of scandal began to wag, and the matrons of the English colony to shake their wicked old heads. They even took upon themselves to remonstrate with John Allison on allowing his daughter to accept the gift, probably instigated thereto by the hints of Silas Marks, who strenuously resented so obvious a point in favour of the man whom he now began to look upon as his rival.

John Allison met their remarks with more dignity than he usually displayed, and relapsed into apathy. If it gave his daughter pleasure to ride, and the animal's keep was provided for by its donor, he saw no reason to interfere. So the gift was duly accepted, and it marked an era in the progress of the ripening

friendship, and forged a very strong link in the chain of future events.

But, day by day, as May's interest in the cowboy grew and deepened, she became more conscious that something of mystery surrounded him. His choice of life and occupation presented an enigma which puzzled her sorely. He rarely spoke of England, and never even hinted at any former state of existence, seemingly taking it for granted in his quiet impassive way that his present vocation was as satisfactory to the little world around him as to himself.

One evening her womanly curiosity found vent in words. All the afternoon they had been fishing in a desultory way, and as the girl lay back on a rug in the stern of the boat, trailing a phantom minnow in their wake, her eye rested on her companion's well-bred weary face. It was not a handsome face, its chief characteristics being strength and determination, but it fascinated her strangely. There was an impression of power and self-reliance about the square chin and set mouth which would have been too severe but for the kindly grey eyes which could soften his features on occasion. To-day they were even more inscrutable than their wont, and it seemed that their owner's mind was fixed on something very far away. With his sleeves rolled back to the elbow he was pulling leisurely, with long easy strokes which kept the light craft moving steadily under the shadow of the cypress

trees. It was very still on the water and scarcely a sound broke the silence until the girl spoke.

"Mr Scott——" she began.

He interrupted her with a smile.

"I thought we had agreed that my name was Jim."

"Well—Jim—then. I want to know something."

"So do I, lots of things. Is it a riddle?"

"It is to me." She hesitated a moment and, woman-like, elected to reach her object by a roundabout course.

"I want to know why Marks hates you so."

"Are you sure he does?"

"Quite sure, but I don't know why he should."

"I will tell you. Because I know him to be an unscrupulous blackguard, and men of Marks's stamp always distrust people who know too much about them."

"Is that the only reason?"

He looked at her with a trace of dawning amusement in his eyes.

"Probably not. But it is enough for the purpose. Go on."

"How do you know I meant to ask you anything more?"

"Because you are a girl, and naturally inquisitive. Besides, I saw it in your eyes."

"Then you're wrong," she answered quickly. "I didn't."

"Very well," he said, and rowed on in silence.

She re-arranged the rug and tilted her straw hat over her face, and the amusement in the cowboy's eyes deepened. She began again abruptly.

"Do you hate him too?"

"Not specially. I have no reason to."

"Because he doesn't know too much about you?"

"Exactly. He only knows what all the rest of the world does—as much as I choose to tell them."

"You don't tell them much."

"No, very little. Why don't you come to the point? That was not the question you meant to ask."

"No, it wasn't. But I don't think I will ask it now at all."

"Better not," he answered. And as he met her eye he laughed.

"Then I will," she answered quickly. "I want to know why you"—she paused—"why you are a cowboy?"

"Well, why not? It is a healthy life and it interests me. Shall we suppose that it is the only thing I am fitted for?"

"But it *isn't*. That is exactly what puzzles me about you," she answered earnestly. "I believe you might have been anything in the world if you had chosen."

"Perhaps I did not choose."

"That sounds rather rude."

"Does it? I apologise."

"Which means that you don't intend to answer."

"Is there any real reason why I should?"

"Yes, every reason. Of all the people I have met since I came to live here, you are the only one I have taken an interest in or made a friend of, and you've been very, very kind to me. And yet I know less about you than I do about any of the others. In all the talks we have had you've never told me one single word about yourself,—I mean about your other self."

"Perhaps if I did, you wouldn't take the same interest in me that you do now. I like you too much to take the risk."

The girl looked up with a little shy smile and there was a very tender light in her blue eyes.

"I don't think you could tell me anything that would lessen my interest," she answered quietly. "But if you don't want to talk about yourself, I'm sorry I asked."

His face grew quite grave.

"Candidly, then, I don't. Some day, if you really wish it, I will tell you what you want to know; but not yet. There are episodes in most men's lives which they do not care to dwell upon, but you are too young to understand that."

She looked at him with a troubled face.

"I'm really sorry I asked you, Jim," she said. "But it wasn't only idle curiosity. You believe that?"

"Yes, I believe it."

For a few minutes the boat drifted on in silence. Then, on a sudden, the line in May's hand tautened

and ran out; a silvery body leapt high in the air and fell again with a loud splash into the water. In an instant the cowboy was all alert.

"Strike, child, strike," he exclaimed, as he headed the boat outwards. "It's a bass and a big one! Hold him steady now till we clear the cypress snags."

Half a dozen strong strokes shot them clear of the dangerous hidden roots; while the girl, quivering with the momentary excitement, gave battle to her prize. It was of short duration. Game as the fish proved himself to be, he was no match for the combination of forces against him. Again and again he ran out and jumped clear of the water, trying without avail to shake himself clear of the barbed hooks. Shorter and shorter grew his circles and less lively his rushes; until the girl, in obedience to instructions, brought the line in hand over hand, its progress marked by a tiny shower of spray upon her frock. Another moment and a huge goggle-eyed bass lay flapping and gasping in the bottom of the boat.

"Five pounds, if he's an ounce," remarked Jim, as he disgorged the battered minnow and lighted his cigarette. "You played him beautifully."

"Did I really?" she asked, her face still flushed with excitement and success. "He's the biggest I ever caught, and I was *so* frightened he was going to get away."

The cowboy smiled, a little cynical smile which May

always resented, because she could not fathom the momentary mood which evoked it.

"When once he's firmly hooked, and there's a woman at the other end," he answered, "it's long odds against the fish, poor devil."

CHAPTER VI

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

SLOWLY but very surely the little black cloud which loomed above the Bungalow at Maryville gathered and assumed a definite shape. Originating in petty trivialities, bred by the monotony of Florida life, the gulf between Kitty Luxmoore and her husband grew and spread until it reached proportions which neither had the necessary energy or determination to bridge. The very knowledge of their own inertness only served to intensify the growing distance between them. It was the almost inevitable sequel to a marriage such as theirs.

For if a man must needs marry a pretty child whose romantic little head is filled with school-girl fancies beyond his ken, it is a dangerous experiment to transplant her suddenly to a country where women need more than average strength of purpose and character if they would withstand the strange demoralising influence which Florida will all too surely exercise upon her hapless victims. Like the subtle poison of her malarial swamps, it is only to be combated by the strongest systems, aided by incessant doses of moral quinine.

And yet Tom Luxmoore, albeit the symptoms of his wife's ailment were as an unread book to him, was not by any means a fool. Otherwise he had never attained to the position of manager to the Maryville Bank, or learned, with clear head and ready resource, to stave off time and again the inevitable collapse of that unstable establishment; which seems to show that a man may have an excellent capacity for the administration of other people's business without in the least understanding his own.

It would have puzzled both husband and wife to define the tangible cause and origin of that drifting apart which each tacitly acknowledged. Kitty, spending the greater part of every day in resourceless solitude, suffered agonies from that *ennui* which saps a woman's moral fibre and spoils her pleasure in life. Luxmoore, returning evening after evening to a cheerless home, wearied in brain and body, longed for the sympathetic companionship which his wife could give no longer. When the romance has died out from two such lives, there is but one note which can restore their discords into harmony. And it was missing, for Providence had decreed that their marriage should be a childless one.

During that most trying period of Kitty's uneventful life she found an added source of irritation in her young sister's popularity and happiness. Not that she really grudged her either, but both made her discon-

tented and finally jealous. The two saw but little of one another, chiefly from geographical reasons, and their correspondence was of a desultory and intermittent nature. May's occasional visits to Maryville had not been a success, for the girl's well-meant attempts at bringing about a better understanding between husband and wife had only succeeded in annoying the latter, because they interested the former.

On the other hand, matters had gone even worse when Kitty had been a temporary inmate of the Allison household in the English colony. For it is galling in the extreme to a married woman to chaperone her younger sister at a ball where the latter introduces her to dancing partners, and the solitude of Mrs Luxmoore's everyday life made it almost impossible for her to enter into the spirit of the thing with that alacrity which May expected from her.

Thus it happened that the Bachelors' Ball, achieved by the united efforts of the English colony's impecunious youth, who clubbed together to dispense cheap hospitality to their friends, resulted in a misunderstanding between the two sisters. It occurred in this wise. Kitty Luxmoore no sooner found herself relegated to the ranks of English matrons, whose portly forms more than filled the limited sitting accommodation, than they unmasked their batteries and opened the fire of scandal and gossip upon their

hapless victim. And the theme of their discourse was Jim Scott.

Inspired by the tongue-loosening potentialities of sweet champagne, they gave rein to their imaginations, and fairly bristled with virtuous indignation. Their leader was a certain Mrs Brunton, the faded relict of a half-pay Indian colonel. She had an unmarried daughter of her own, and was May Allison's special aversion.

"Everybody is talking about it, my dear," she said, with a righteous snort, "and I feel that it is time for someone to interfere. I have spoken to your father myself, and he only laughed at me. I begged him to use his influence with your sister, and he actually said that he did not think he had any. Of course we all know that she means no harm, poor child; but then she is so young and inexperienced. Surely you can speak to her."

Annoyed as she was, the attack roused Kitty's sisterly instincts. Her lip curled with a little smile of contempt as she turned to the speaker.

"I suppose you know Jim Scott?" she asked.

"I know him very well by reputation," answered Mrs Brunton, with an intonation which hinted at things unspeakable. "That is why I feel it my duty to warn you."

"Thank you," was the answer, "but I am afraid you are wasting time. He happens to be a great friend

of mine, and of my husband's. I am very glad that May should have a companion whom I respect so much. And really, if my father sees no harm in their friendship, I fail to see that it is any business of any one else's."

She drew up her little figure with a certain dignity which sat well upon her, and sailed across to the further end of the room where May, flushed with childish pleasure and excitement, was seeking a *vis-a-vis* for a set of lancers. But she had burned her boats behind her.

The woman who is compelled to sit out the best part of a ball in company with others of her own sex to whom she has thrown down the gauntlet, can hope for but little enjoyment.

So the elder sister dragged through a very weary evening, while the younger danced through a well-filled programme with only one half-formed regret, the absence of a partner who had answered her question of yesterday with the little cynical smile she disliked so much.

"My dear child, a camp fire is more in my line than a ball-room, and I've forgotten how to dance years and years ago."

But in the small hours of the morning, when women exchange confidences over the mysteries of the hair-brush, the sisters talked it over.

"Kitty," said the younger, "I'm afraid you didn't

enjoy yourself a bit. You hardly danced at all, and I hate to see you sitting out with all those wretched old frumps."

"Yes, it wasn't particularly exciting. Especially as they did nothing but run you down all the time."

May laughed, shaking out a long mane of bright brown hair, and poising an ivory brush in mid air.

"Poor old things, jealous of the partners I took away from their daughters. What did they say?"

"They didn't *say* as much as they hinted. But it won't do you any good to get yourself talked about, May; and scandal grows pretty quickly in a place like this."

She was cross and out of tune, tired too, and a little jealous. May did not understand her tone, but the smile died out of her face.

"Scandal?" she echoed. "Out with it, Kitty. What have I done?"

Kitty Luxmoore shrugged her shoulders.

"That seems to be the question. Apparently you and Jim Scott are the only two people who can answer it."

"Kitty!" The blue eyes blazed indignation.

"Oh, it's no good pretending to be angry with me. I know perfectly well that you don't mean any harm, but I think it is a mistake to give people the chance of talking."

"What did they say?" The girlish face was very

determined, and Kitty was rather sorry she had gone so far.

"The usual things people say about girls who are—indiscreet. They aren't pleasant to hear about your own sister. I think it's time to go to bed. Good-night."

She turned towards the door, but May was too quick for her. In a second she stood before the doorway, her face curiously changed and aged, her breath coming quick and short.

"I asked you what they said."

Kitty did not like it. She had not expected her words to be taken so seriously. But there was no escape, and she answered with a deliberateness which was almost harsh.

"If you really want to know, they said that you and Jim Scott were far too much together, and they wondered that father allowed it."

"Well, go on."

"Don't you think that is enough? Look here, May, you're very young, and you don't know Florida as I do, or you would see that it is not wise to let people connect your name with his as they are doing."

"And you listened! You allowed them to say things like that about me!"

"I did not!" indignantly. "I said it was no business of theirs, and I believe I quarrelled with them."

But it spoiled the whole of my evening, and I'm not at all sure that they weren't in the right. If you take my advice, you will see as little of Jim Scott as you can, unless you mean——" she hesitated.

"Unless I mean——?"

"To marry him. I'm sorry if I've made you angry, but you insisted on hearing the truth. Now, perhaps, you will let me go to bed."

Without a word the girl opened the door, allowed her sister to pass, and then shut and locked it. For half an hour she paced her room with flaming cheeks and angry eyes. Then she cried a little, and finally went to bed.

But the conversation had a curious effect upon her, leaving traces out of all proportion to its importance. Intangibly it broadened the breach between her sister and herself, and it filled her with a contempt for the malicious tongue of petty slander which served to emphasize her aloofness from the surroundings amongst which her life had been cast. It was one of those details which go to divert the current of human destinies.

For that is a very critical period in a girl's life in which she blossoms into womanhood; and tenfold more so when she is cut off, not only from a mother's watchful care, but from female influence of every kind. For May that winter was a very lonely one, even her ally the cowboy having betaken himself to

his mysterious homestead amongst the Everglades and the Seminole Indians.

And judging his opportunity with his usual eye to his ultimate object, Silas Marks became a very constant visitor to her father's house. Under one pretext or another he contrived to make an almost daily call; and his attentions, though scarcely exceeding those of an ordinary guest, grated on the nerves of the girl already prejudiced against him.

Fortune played into his hands; for she visited Florida, during that memorable winter, with a frost the like of which the oldest inhabitant could not recall. And it came at the critical moment when the country had touched the highest point of prosperity which it will probably ever know.

A perfect spring, followed by an equable summer, had brought the orange crop to an unwonted state of perfection. Everywhere the trees, gorgeous with a wealth of glossy dark green foliage, were laden almost to breaking point with rapidly ripening fruit. And on every hand their jubilant owners counted upon a golden harvest.

Then suddenly one night, without hint or warning, the thermometer fell to freezing point. Consternation overtook the hapless dependents upon a climate's vagaries; for they realised, all too surely, the consequences of its continuance. And for three successive days and nights it did continue, not in the

harmless disguise of a temporary "cold snap," but in all the black and bitter reality of fifteen degrees of solid frost.

On the fourth morning the cold wave passed away, the sun shone forth in all his might and glory to beam upon his rival's handiwork, and the great "freeze" passed into history. But the mischief was irrevocable.

From the wilted branches of the hapless trees there hung a crop, a record crop, of useless fruit. Shrivelled and unsaleable, it mocked its grower's hopes, millions of dollars worth of produce, converted in three short days into a mere drug in the market.

And from that moment Florida fruit farming fell from the high estate of a lucrative investment to the level of a mere risky speculation. And widespread ruin followed in its train.

The thing was so unexpected, so totally without precedent, that business was temporarily paralysed. Men whose livelihood depended upon their harvest were left without a resource; in the majority of cases they had already forestalled their expected profits.

John Allison was a heavy sufferer. With business capacities of the vaguest, and a soul wrapped up in the black cloth which sheltered his camera, his calculations had been based upon the very simplest problem in proportion. His trees having produced twice as much fruit this season as last, he had credited himself in advance with exactly double his former income.

Like many men of otherwise unquestioned sanity he had invested in the purchase of his property and its necessary improvements every penny of his available capital, leaving himself nothing whatever to fall back upon in the event of failure.

And in the helplessness of a crisis where the cowboy's resource might have proved invaluable, he found himself with no other advice on which to rely than that of an unscrupulous land agent. Accepting it, he borrowed from the latter on mortgage a sum sufficient to tide him over his immediate difficulties, and he advertised for a pupil to help him in the payment of current expenses.

CHAPTER VII

"CHIPMONK"

OF the two the pupil turned out by far the lesser failure from John Allison's point of view, proving at least a source of additional revenue instead of a further drain on the photographer's slender exchequer. For the choice was a comparatively happy one.

When one man undertakes to instruct another on matters of which both are profoundly ignorant, the inevitable collapse becomes a mere question of how long the pupil takes to discover that he is not receiving due value for his money. The period necessarily varies according to whether he personally provides the sinews of war or not. Given an easy-going youth with a wealthy father, there is a prospect of things going smoothly for a very considerable time, unless external influence is brought to bear.

Now, Arthur Manners was an essentially easy-going youth, and he had the additional advantage of being unquestionably a gentleman. There are very few countries or conditions of life in which this desideratum is not a very potent factor.

The second son of a country squire with sufficient

means to do things comfortably, though he may envy his elder brother's lot in life, has but little to complain of in his own. It is an understood thing that, whatever his future career may be, the capital necessary to provide him with a start will be duly forthcoming. And if his public school successes have been gained in the cricket field rather than the class-room; and his tastes incline more to the covert-side than the counting-house, the prospect of an open-air life in a new country will appeal to him as presenting a pleasant combination of sport and business.

In the decade which follows his eighteenth birthday, an inexplicable glamour hangs around the magic sentence, "roughing it in the States." And to John Allison's credit be it recorded that the advertisement in the *Morning Post* which secured him a pupil was a distinctly picturesque one. Whatever his technical failures might be, he possessed the artistic imagination in a high degree.

Two or three letters were exchanged across the Atlantic, the usual unnecessary questions as to outfit asked and answered, a central cabin on a fleet Cunarder secured, and Arthur Manners took leave of his female relatives at Liverpool with a comfortable sum of ready money in his dressing-bag and a few qualms as to his seamanship in his heart.

The former was not unnecessarily called upon, for he had sufficient good sense to eschew the blandish-

ments of the poker gang who infest the smoking-saloons of fashionable liners; and the latter were happily unfounded, for he achieved that ambition of the youthful sea-goer, the proud distinction of "never missing a meal."

After the manner of his kind he put up at the Hoffman House, spent a week in New York, compared its customs unfavourably with those of his native land, and finally reached his destination—after a dusty journey of a thousand miles in a Pullman car—on excellent terms with himself and the world in general; a conclusive proof of the buoyancy of his youthful spirits and the excellence of an undisturbed digestion.

In the course of a couple of months he settled down to the novelty of his surroundings, underwent the unpleasant process of acclimatisation to a semi-tropical climate, established his claim to a place in the polo team, won a billiard tournament in the English club at Orangeville where he made innumerable friends, and was in a fair way to fall in love with May Allison.

To the latter his advent made a distinctly pleasant break in the monotony of Florida life. She was just a little hurt by the silence of the only man who really interested her, who had grown to be a part of her daily life and whom she had not seen for six months. At least, she thought, he might have written her an occasional letter. And she was also a little distressed

by the constant attentions of the man whom she instinctively distrusted, the suave land agent who had wormed himself into her father's confidence and established his right to the position of *l'ami de famille*.

Under the circumstances she had no alternative but to accept the civilities of which he was shrewd enough to take advantage without ever overstepping the bounds of mere acquaintanceship, but she resented deeply the position into which she found herself forced against her will. Silas Marks, on the many occasions which brought him into the girl's company, never once made the mistake of saying openly one single word against the cowboy whom he detested, but he made a much greater one in that he never missed an opportunity of hinting at things which were better left unsaid. He had craft enough to understand that this was the one subject on which he could interest his hearer and, knowing in reality far less of Jim Scott than did May herself, he traded upon her obvious desire to learn something of the inner life of the man whom he felt to be his rival.

Another matter which affected May deeply was the breach which had gradually widened between her sister and herself. Blaming herself for the part she had taken in creating it, she had done everything in her power to bring about a better understanding, if not a complete reconciliation. But Kitty Luxmoore

had not helped her and she had given up the attempt in despair. And now her brother-in-law had determined upon a visit to New York, and was extremely loath to leave his wife alone. Kitty would neither consent to stay with her sister or to allow the latter to visit her, declaring that she much preferred to be left alone. And May distrusted these symptoms, for she was beginning to understand.

Arthur Manner's advent into the little circle then, could not have been better timed; and the girl was grateful to him for a fresh companionship and a break in the monotony of her uneventful life. Nevertheless, longing for Jim Scott's return, she found herself wondering how he and the new pupil would get on together. It occurred to her vaguely that their meeting might be fraught with results of considerable importance. In due course came the opportunity.

Suddenly awaking from the lethargy born of the hot weather, the youth of the English colony laid their heads together and in solemn conclave at the club determined to get up a gymkhana on original lines. When an idea of this kind once entered their heads they became for the nonce energy personified; and over a large consumption of club whisky they ultimately evolved a magnificent programme. The polo ground was at their disposal; one or two of their number had taken part in a similar entertainment in India; and the thing rapidly grew into shape.

Its great feature was to be a steeplechase with a course suited to the requirements of their polo ponies, and on the construction of the said course much time and labour were necessarily expended. To Arthur Manners, who was a very fair judge of a horse's pace and performances, occurred the brilliant idea of entering May's black pony for the event, and much consultation did the training of that excellent little animal afford the pair. The girl found an unsuspected source of enjoyment in the study of trial gallops, adjustment of weights, and other matters connected with his training; though she could not divest herself of the idea that their charge was compelled to do his work on a very insufficient allowance of food. But on this point Manners was adamant, and himself daily doled out the animal's meagre measure of corn with all the usual enthusiasm characteristic of the amateur who, sound in theory, is entirely deficient in practical knowledge.

And as the weeks went by "Chipmonk," as they christened the pony, certainly began to make wonderful improvement, putting on muscle in place of flesh, and galloping over the miniature fences which had been constructed for his education in something like racing form. But, like many other animals, human and otherwise, his temper suffered considerably under the rigorous course of training to which he was subjected; and Arthur Manners, though by no means a bad horse-

man, began to find his mount what he described as "a pretty good handful."

A fortnight before the date fixed for the great event matters reached a climax and threatened to leave the embryo steeple-chaser without a rider at all; for he managed to get rid of his tutor during an exercise gallop in the pine woods by putting his foot in a stump hole and coming down on his head. Happily the animal was uninjured, but Manners was not so fortunate and succeeded in dislocating his shoulder. The long delay which ensued before the limb could be attended to set up an inflammation which disabled him for a considerable time and effectually spoiled his chance of riding the winner.

The difficulty of finding a suitable jockey became a question which May and the invalid eagerly discussed day by day with little hope of solution; and the former, who herself continued the animal's exercise gallops with conspicuous success, would gladly have taken upon herself the task of steering him had the conditions permitted. Every Englishman in the neighbourhood who had the slightest pretension to horsemanship—and some of them were slight indeed—had already been pressed into service, and things looked very black until Manners returned one evening from the English Club with his arm in a sling and a triumphant smile on his face.

"Miss Allison," he burst out as he met her at the

gate, "I've found a jockey! He knows you and he knows Chipmonk, and he's a real good chap."

The girl turned quite pale.

"Who do you mean?" she asked breathlessly.
"Not Jim Scott?"

"That's the man! How did you guess? He turned up this evening from somewhere down south, and I met him playing pool at the Club. He's taking a drove of ponies up country for sale and he was awfully keen when I told him about the race. He's coming out to-morrow morning to look at Chipmonk, and he says that if he eats nothing for a week he thinks he can get within a couple of pounds of the weight. They say he can ride, too. Isn't it splendid?"

In his enthusiasm he never marked how the hot blood rushed to the girl's face as she turned aside. But it did strike him that she had not responded as he expected; and he added quickly,—

"You don't mind my asking him, do you? I knew how keen you were on getting a jockey, and I jumped at the chance. They say he's only a cowboy, but he talks like a gentleman, and you can tell he must be a horseman."

While he spoke May had recovered her self-possession, and she answered now with an enthusiasm equal to his own.

"Oh, I'm so glad! There isn't anyone I would

sooner have trusted the pony to than Jim Scott. It was he who gave him to me and I've never seen anyone yet who could ride like him." Then with womanly instinct she added, "But I'm so sorry for your own disappointment; you've taken so much trouble, and it does seem hard that you can only sit and look on after all."

"Never mind about me. If the pony wins I shall be more than satisfied; besides I shall have all the honour and glory of training him. Don't you think it would be just as well if we went and looked over the fences?"

So they went over the improvised training ground for the hundredth time, strengthening a hurdle here and there and winding up with a visit to the stable, where their charge was made snug for the night. And Manners smiled when the girl took the soft muzzle between her hands and kissed it.

"I'm sure he'll win," she said. "What time is Jim coming in the morning?"

He came very early, arriving before they had finished breakfast, and greeted May as casually as though he had left her only the day before. And the girl, all eagerness and expectation, marvelled that he should waste time in discussing the results of the frost with her father before he even suggested a visit to the stable. Manners was obviously disappointed; he had expected a keenness equal to his own.

The black pony was in a very bad temper that morn-

ing and resented the operation of saddling and being led out more than usual. But the cowboy leaned against a post and smoked a cigarette with a tired smile on his face, never so much as offering a suggestion. He cast one critical glance over the animal as it playfully grabbed at Manner's sound arm and relapsed into comparative apathy.

But a minute later, when he swung himself into the saddle and drew the reins through his fingers, both the critical observers noted the docility with which the animal bent to his bridle and, though quivering in every limb, trotted quietly in the direction of his work in a manner quite new to both of them.

That morning's gallop was probably the shortest Chipmonk had done in the course of his preparation, for Jim Scott contented himself with racing him over three fences only, and Manners wholly disapproved of his methods. In the first place he took them at a pace which positively made his critic hold his breath in anticipation, though he was fain to confess that he had never seen an animal similarly extended jump in such collected form. And in the second, Jim never took his beloved cigarette from his mouth, which seemed to the enthusiastic trainer a most unbusiness-like proceeding. But the cowboy's iron seat and delicate hands left a very vivid impression on his memory.

The rider's comments were very short and laconic.

"You've trained him much too fine," he said as he pulled up, "and you've very nearly spoiled his temper. But he certainly can jump and he's very nearly fast enough to win. If you want me to ride him," he added, "you must leave him entirely in my hands for the next week. I shall take him away, and you won't see him again until he comes on to the course. Do you mind?"

The girl did mind very much indeed. She wanted to see both horse and rider again long before the day of the gymkhana. But she did not say so.

"Then that's settled," remarked Jim, leisurely. "By the way, what are your colours?"

"We haven't decided yet," said Manners. "They need only be declared overnight. Here are the conditions."

The two men bent over the well-thumbed card for five minutes, in consultation over weights, penalties, and allowances.

"All right, I understand," said the cowboy at length. "And I'll attend to all the details. I have a very busy week before me, but I'll turn up in time for Chipmonk's race."

"And you think he will win?" asked the eager trainer.

Jim Scott looked at him pensively. "If I did, I probably shouldn't say so," he answered. "But if I didn't, I probably shouldn't ride him."

The enigmatic answer was unsatisfactory; but he did not supplement it, and ten minutes later took his departure, with the black pony snorting playfully at the end of a strong halter.

"He's a rum chap," commented Manners, as he watched him go. "But he knows how to ride."

And May Allison, turning from the empty stall with a sigh, wondered vaguely at the feeling of disappointment which oppressed her.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT GYMKHANA

AS a set-off against its many disadvantages, climatic and otherwise, Florida can at least boast of being, in matters meteorological, freer from unexpected eccentricities than other more favoured lands. Thus in the early spring you may lay your plans for an open-air function with reasonable certainty of fine weather. The detail may be a minor one, but it is worthy of note as being one of the few points on which the Mother country might with advantage take a hint from her bastard offspring. For none but the severest of turf enthusiasts can deny that an indifferently managed race-meeting in perfect weather is to be preferred even to the Cup day at Ascot in a deluge of rain.

The historic gymkhana of the English Polo Club owed far more to nature than to art, for in the matter of weather nothing more perfect could have been devised. It is probable that the halo of the past has surrounded the memorable meeting with an undeserved glamour which prompts men to invest it with perfections beyond its due; but the *laudatores*

temporis acti are ever in the majority, and at least it went beyond anything hitherto projected in the land of its birth.

By dint of plenteous watering the Bermuda grass had been coaxed into a reasonable imitation of turf, and the grand-stand shone resplendent in a new coat of white paint. The rails had been deftly whitewashed by the personal industry of the stewards themselves, and the fences of the steeplechase course strengthened and stiffened into tolerable obstacles by the enthusiasm of men who did not propose to risk their own limbs in riding over them.

However deficient its component parts may be in matters of technical detail, it is an undoubted fact that in questions connected with sport an English community will, through sheer force of enthusiasm, rise to unexpected altitudes. In the present instance the promoters of the meeting certainly outdid themselves in their efforts to bid for success. Of course, there were too many events on the card, and naturally there was considerable internal dissension amongst the framers of the conditions, an obvious result of the interest which each one took, directly or indirectly, in the success of a particular animal. But in respect of the chief event, the Polo Club Steeplechase, there had been unusual unanimity. It was felt that this was a matter calling for co-operation of the most earnest kind, and much secrecy and mystification

prevailed over the schooling and trials of the fifteen candidates which composed the field. But the consensus of opinion pointed to three as likely to furnish the winner, and of these Miss Allison's "Chipmonk" divided favouritism with Mr Wynne's "Little Bob," a smart grey pony who was known to have won races in that mysterious region "up North," and whose owner and rider had set his heart—for reasons which will presently appear—on the acquisition of the Cup.

It was a glorious April morning, and albeit the thermometer registered something like seventy in the shade, a pleasant breeze wafted the scent of orange blossom over the expanse of the well-kept racecourse. At an early hour the stands began to fill with Florida's rank and fashion, dressed in its very smartest frocks, and secure in the certainty of immunity from rain. Long before the hour set for the first event it became obvious to the most pessimistic of the stewards that the bugbear of insufficient gate-money need no longer be dreaded, and that they would be in a position to meet all their liabilities without further calls on the slender resources of their supporters. In Florida race-meetings this is an important and very unusual state of affairs.

Amongst the earliest arrivals on the course was May Allison, accompanied by Chipmonk's trainer, both of them eager to see their representative and his jockey. In the latter object they were doomed to

disappointment. They found the pony, indeed, in the charge of a taciturn negro, who declined even to lift the rugs in which Chipmonk was swathed from head to tail, and who only vouchsafed the information, in answer to Manner's eager enquiries, that his master had walked over the course at six o'clock in the morning and that he'd be "on hand, sure enuff" when he was wanted. May, who knew the cowboy's ways, was well satisfied that this would be so; but Manners, fretting at his own inability to occupy any position other than that of a spectator, was in a very fever of excitement and apprehension. A glance at the card partially reassured him, from the fact that his candidate's colours had been duly entered as "white, with cherry hoops and cap"; and he admitted that the fact of a preliminary inspection of the course was a point in Jim Scott's favour. But he could not understand the latter's carelessness in not having already put in an appearance.

The preliminary events on the card differed but slightly from the usual eccentricities which have from time immemorial done duty on such occasions, but they afforded unbounded amusement to the onlookers. The only person who probably failed to participate in the general hilarity was the gentleman who had been elected to the onerous post of starter, his chief qualification for which position was his unquestioned flow of vituperative language. His powers were tried to the

uttermost and he was, in his own vernacular, "as hoarse as a blooming crow" long before he had successfully coped with the last race. For, in addition to the ordinary difficulties of despatching a large field of amateur jockeys on half-trained ponies, he had to contend with an unwonted one in the person of Mr Allison, who insisted on taking photographs of the start of every race, and was inclined to be annoyed because the riders could not be recalled to give him a better chance.

The most popular entry with the lady spectators was the "thread needle" race, the conditions being that the ponies should be mounted on the fall of the flag, ridden over a hurdle, and pulled up at the further end of the course, where the lady nominated by each jockey had to thread a needle carried by her knight, who proceeded to race back over the obstacle with his trophy in his hand. For this event there were a dozen starters, amongst them being Tommy Wynne on his second string, armed with a needle specially provided by the object of his adoration, Miss Nelly Brunton, and selected owing to the abnormal size of its eye. But the young lady, though conscious of the picturesqueness of her hat and dainty frock, was reduced to such a state of nervousness by the knowledge that her mother's race-glasses were severely focussed upon her, that she only succeeded in threading the needle at the fourth attempt, the three previous failures having

driven the point of the weapon into her trembling fingers. And as a result her swain had to put up with second place to a young gentleman who, with a shrewdness beyond his years, had selected an accomplice in the symmetrical shape of a fair Floridian who boasted that "she guessed she knew how to fix things" for him. And so indeed she did; for, characteristically disregarding all ideas of fair-play, she furnished her admirer with a darning needle which boasted a practicable top, and which she deftly threaded at the first attempt. And Nelly Brunton returned to the maternal wing with tears in her blue eyes.

Meanwhile the stands had filled apace, and interest was centred on the great event of the day. Manners had secured for himself and May Allison two of the best seats available, and half an hour before the time set for the steeplechase they were anxiously consulting Chipmonk's attendant as to his master's whereabouts. Manners was in a state of perturbation, which necessitated constant inspection of his watch, and May herself was becoming a trifle uneasy when, turning suddenly, she found herself face to face with her brother-in-law.

"Oh, Tom," she said, "I'm so glad you were able to come. Where is Kitty?"

Luxmoore's face betokened his disappointment.

"She wouldn't come, after all," he answered, "and I'm more disappointed than I can tell you. I have to

go north one day this week, and I was so anxious to try and arrange for you to stay with her. I want to have a talk with you, May," he added in a lower voice, "but we'll wait until the race is over. Come and show me your champion."

They found the imperturbable negro leading his charge slowly backwards and forwards in the impromptu paddock, and Manners seized upon the new-comer to pour forth his doubts as to their jockey.

"Don't you worry, my boy," said Luxmoore. "Jim Scott never missed an engagement in his life, though he generally runs things a bit fine. By Jove, here he comes."

They turned in the direction he indicated, and Manners gave vent to an exclamation of excitement. Ridden at headlong pace down the sandy avenue came a ewe-necked pony in a lather from head to tail, whose owner swung himself from the saddle before the animal had fairly stopped, and made fast his rein to the post of the rail fence. Pausing a moment to light a cigarette, he walked leisurely into the enclosure and took off his hat to May. "Good morning," he said, "how are we for time?"

"Only twelve minutes," answered Manners, seizing him by the arm. "Come on, you've got to dress."

"All right, old man, I'll be ready before half of them have weighed out. How do you think the pony looks?"

"I haven't seen anything except his tail; the man won't even lift a rug."

Jim smiled and approached the negro. "Where are my things? In the dressing tent?"

"Yes, sah," responded the child of Ham.

"Right; saddle the pony in five minutes." He turned to May. "I've had to train pretty fine," he said, and she noticed that his cheeks were pinched and white, "and even now I'm about two pounds overweight; it's these ridiculously long legs of mine that do it."

The girl looked in his face with an expression almost piteous. "Oh, Jim," she said, "do you think he will win?"

"We will do our best, little girl," he answered; and turning, vanished into the dressing tent closely followed by the trainer.

Luxmoore turned to the girl, who was trembling with suppressed excitement.

"Better go and take our places," he said. "There's no good waiting here, and we can watch them go down to the post."

And she followed him without a word.

In the grand stand excitement was at fever height. Tommy Wynne, gorgeous in the panoply of a silk jacket worked by the fingers of his charmer, was whispering nervously in her ear under the watchful eye of his prospective mother-in-law. Nelly Brunton had

crumpled the race-card in her daintily gloved hand into a tiny shapeless mass.

Immediately behind them sat Silas Marks in company of a travelling Englishman whom he had annexed, and to whom he was attempting to convey the impression that the present function was one of frequent occurrence in the English colony.

Placidly indifferent, his hearer surveyed the scene through his eye-glass, mentally amused at the general enthusiasm and slightly bored at his host's garrulity.

As May Allison took her place the land agent leaned forward to speak to her and the girl's pretty profile came within the range of the eye-glass.

"Introduce me," whispered its owner. And Marks elaborately presented him as "The Honourable Rupert Howard," strongly accenting the prefix.

"I see you have a pony running, Miss Allison," he said, in a pleasant English voice which reminded her of Jim's. "I hope he is going to win."

Nelly Brunton lifted a frightened face from the perusal of her crumpled card, and a little murmur proclaimed the appearance of the first competitor. Every eye was fixed upon him as his irresolute jockey rode him over a preliminary hurdle, landing with an unpleasant scramble which very nearly unseated him and utterly upset his equanimity. But he was quickly followed by half a dozen more, and loud were the comments on their performances as they

duly negotiated the obstacle with varying indifference.

A moment's lull, and a whisper of "Little Bob."

Reaching rather awkwardly at his bridle a smart grey pony came raking down the course at a gallop.

Nelly Brunton caught her breath hard as his jockey directed a smile at the centre of the grand stand and flew his preliminary hurdle with a couple of yards to spare on either side.

At the same moment Arthur Manners bustled into his place in a state of breathless excitement.

"It's all right," he announced. "He's declared two pounds overweight and the pony's as fit as a fiddle. Never saw a chap take anything so coolly in my life."

And in strong contrast to his own enthusiasm the last of the fifteen starters trotted quietly down the course; Chipmonk, in the hands of his present rider, playing with his plain snaffle bridle as though the unwonted hubbub of a race-course were an everyday experience. May Allison, watching as in a dream, contrasted the rider in silk jacket and faultless breeches and boots with the heterogeneous crowd who had preceded him.

"Hullo!" exclaimed an English voice behind her. "Who's the jockey?"

Silas Marks, noting the start of surprise, took up the speaker quickly.

"Jim Scott, a countryman of your own," he answered. "Guess you've met in the old country?"

His eagerness was a shade too obvious, and "The Honourable" was not as young as he looked.

"Never heard the name in my life," he replied languidly. "But if there's a trustworthy bookie in the place I'll have a fiver on Chipmonk just for luck."

His commission remained unexecuted, but for many a day thereafter he carried in his memory the quick grateful smile of a pretty flushed face that met his own but for an instant.

The steady hum of conversation around them had risen to an excited buzz. Through it May Allison heard Manners expounding details to Luxmoore.

"Two miles . . . twice round the course . . . water jump, third fence from here. . . . By Jove, they're off."

After a couple of failures the white flag had dropped to a tolerable start, and a brilliant cohort of indifferent jockeys had charged the first obstacle like a troop of cavalry. One fell; two refused; a jockey lost his cap; and a little bay mare, utterly out of her rider's control, rushed to the front at Grand National pace.

"That sportsman will break his neck if he don't watch it," remarked the owner of the eye-glass. And he probably would if the mare had not galloped out of the course before she reached the next fence and disappeared with her helpless jockey into the pine woods.

At the water jump another refusal and two falls

further diminished the field ; but May noted that Chipmonk, though last but one, hopped over the obstacle without the slightest apparent effort, clearing a prostrate horseman in his stride.

"He's lying an awful long way behind," said Manners, his glasses glued to his eye. "I hope to goodness he's a fair judge of pace."

And the land agent noted a twinkle of amusement on "The Honourable's" good-looking face.

On the far side of the course the ponies momentarily disappeared from view and as they came round for the second time the field was reduced to six, three of whom had obviously no chance whatever. But Little Bob and a roan mare were going well enough and Chipmonk had drawn into fourth place. Opposite the grand stand his chance was almost extinguished, nothing but the rider's coolness and the quickness with which the little animal recovered himself saving the situation. As they rose at the fence a beaten pony cannoned against him and for one hideous moment May shut her eyes as Chipmonk pecked on the landing side and stumbled on to his nose. Jim Scott sat motionless in his saddle as the other fell in a complicated heap at his side. And Tommy Wynne, looking over his shoulder, noted that his most dangerous opponent had lost a couple of lengths.

But the horseman behind him had gauged his mount's capacities to an ounce, and was not to be flurried ; yard

by yard he made good his ground, the pony jumping the more carefully for his mishap; and as they cleared the last hurdle with a straight run in of three hundred yards before them Little Bob was leading by a bare length. May Allison's face was white as a sheet and the fragments of Nelly Brunton's race-card lay at her restless feet.

In the sudden silence the Englishman's whisper to his companion carried far beyond his intention.

"It's a damned good race," he announced.

And so indeed it was. A hundred yards from home Little Bob's rider caught up his whip and sat down to ride in grim earnest, for the white and cherry hoops were at his girth and their wearer had not moved.

From the serried ranks of the grand stand arose a perfect babel of sound as the partisans of the two leaders shouted themselves hoarse. Manners was on his feet gesticulating wildly and even Luxmoore had lost his habitual calm. The grey pony's head was still well to the front.

But almost on the post came the climax; as Jim Scott, timing his rush to the fraction of a second, made his one determined effort and Chipmonk shot past the judge's box a winner by the shortest of heads.

"The best piece of riding I've seen for years," remarked the Honourable Rupert as he watched the numbers go up. "But the man you call Jim Scott would have won with either."

Which was probably true, despite Nelly Brunton's indignant protest.

Then everybody crowded to the weighing-room, congratulating the winner or condoling with Tommy Wynne according to their partisanship. But May, after one glance at her favourite's reeking neck, turned aside with Luxmoore to a corner of the deserted paddock. Their conversation was short and very earnest, leaving the girl with a troubled face which puzzled those who thronged to congratulate her on her success.

Ten minutes later she stood by the rail fence where the cowboy, in everyday attire, was tightening the ewe-necked pony's girths.

"I've sent Chipmonk home to your stable," he said, "and you'll find him none the worse. I didn't punish him more than I could help, but it was a pretty tight fit." He caught the girl's eye and stopped abruptly. "What is it, May?" he asked in quite a different tone.

"I wasn't thinking of the pony," she answered, with a faint little ghost of a smile, "and I haven't even thanked you for winning. But, oh, Jim, I'm in trouble."

He bent towards her.

"What is it? Anything I can do?"

"I don't know, I hardly like to ask you. It's—about Kitty."

The words came out with difficulty and she flushed scarlet as she whispered them.

He laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Tell me all about it," he answered gravely. "You know you can trust me."

For some minutes she spoke low and earnestly, while Jim listened in silence.

"When does Luxmoore go north?" he asked, when she finished.

"The day after to-morrow."

"And you don't want your sister left alone during the week he's away."

She shook her head, keeping her eyes averted from his own.

"Very well. We are going north with the ponies to-night in any case and we can make Maryville to-morrow evening. I'll wait there till he comes back. Don't say any more, you may be mistaken after all."

He held her hand for a moment, and mounted his pony.

"Oh, Jim," said the girl, "how good you are. I don't know how to thank you."

"Then don't try. What's the use of having a pal unless he can help you?"

He took off his hat and put the ewe-necked pony into a canter. Half way in to Orangeville he sped past the land agent's buggy and started involuntarily

as the eye-glass of its other occupant focussed him. But he only galloped the faster.

Silas Marks turned to his companion and spoke earnestly.

"You've met that man in England. What name did he go by over there?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because he's a friend of mine and I'd like to do him a good turn if he'd allow me."

The Honourable Rupert turned and scrutinised him attentively. Then he dropped his eye-glass and over his face there stole an expression of bland imperturbability.

"His name is Jim Scott," he remarked deliberately, and relapsed into silence.

The near side pony started into a gallop as the whip fell viciously across his flank.

CHAPTER IX

"UNCLE BILLY"

TWO mornings later Captain Luxmoore paced the platform of the little station at Maryville, awaiting the arrival of the six o'clock train for Harrisburg. His careworn face was grave even beyond its wont, and that with an expression not wholly to be accounted for by the discomforts attendant on a hurried breakfast and an early start.

Even in the most prosperous days of the orange-growing industry the little town of Maryville had never quite attained to the dignity of a fashionable winter resort and its means of communication with the North remained correspondingly primitive. A single line of rail connected the place with Harrisburg, and by starting at six o'clock in the morning it was possible to perform the thirty mile journey in time to catch the seven-thirty boat at the latter point. A journey of seventy miles down the St John's River landed the traveller at Jacksonville at five o'clock in the afternoon. To-day they ran a Pullman car right through from New York.

Whatever Captain Luxmoore's thoughts may have

been, so deeply was he engrossed in them that he almost ran into the arms of a tall cowboy advancing to meet him from the further end of the platform before he recognised his friend Jim Scott.

"Hullo," he exclaimed, "where do you spring from?"

"Came in last night with a drove of Texas ponies," was the reply, "and we're camping up at Uncle Billy's. You must come and look them over when you get back. May Allison tells me you're going north."

"Yes, worse luck. I have some business to attend to for the Bank; I wish I could get out of it."

"How's Mrs Luxmoore?"

"Not at all well, I'm sorry to say. To tell the truth I'm rather uneasy about her. She's been out of sorts, dull and listless, for some time. No wonder, poor little woman, after being cooped up so long in this beastly place. I'm trying to arrange to take her over to England this summer; I think the change might do her good."

"I'm sure it would," said Jim Scott.

For some moments neither spoke. Suddenly Luxmoore turned to his companion.

"Jim," he began nervously, "I wish you would do something for me. I don't half like the idea of leaving Kitty alone just now, she's—not quite herself. You know what this infernal country is. I'm *obliged* to go north to-day," he continued rapidly, "and I couldn't

take her with me. But I wish you would look after her while I'm away. She likes you, and I fancy you could cheer her up. You don't mind my asking you?" he finished abruptly.

"Of course not," said the cowboy simply. "I understand. Here's your train."

Heralded by the melancholy note of its clanging bell, the old-fashioned engine lumbered into view. Luxmoore shook his companion warmly by the hand.

"Thanks, old chap," he said, "I know I can depend on you, and there was no one else I could have spoken to."

He took his place in the train and Jim Scott stood pensively watching until it steamed out of sight.

"Poor devil!" he muttered as he carefully lighted a cigarette. He walked up the wooden platform and unhitched the rope by which his pony had been tied to the rail fence outside the station, swung his lengthy frame into the saddle and cantered off down the sandy road.

Turning abruptly to the left as he cleared the little town he pulled up half a mile further on at a rough little log house, in a paddock outside which a drove of some thirty Texas ponies were cropping the scanty herbage. Removing his saddle and bridle with a dexterity born of long practice, the cowboy turned his mount loose amongst the rest.

The homestead which he entered with the freedom of one who is certain of his reception, was the property of an eccentric old cracker known far and wide by the *sobriquet* of Uncle Billy. As a matter of fact he had not a nephew in the world, nor had his parents bestowed upon him the baptismal name of William ; but somebody had detected in him a fancied resemblance to one of the immortal Outcasts of Poker Flat, and whether well-founded or not, the name had stuck. He was the most cantankerous old gentleman in Maryville and probably the most unpopular, from his habit of expressing his plain and uncomplimentary opinion of all and sundry with whom he came in contact. The only person whom he was never known to abuse was Jim Scott, whom he treated with a curious mixture of deference and freedom of speech which was sometimes rather ludicrous. It was supposed that he had furnished the capital for many of the younger man's earlier speculations and, be this as it may, his confidence in Jim's judgment and resource was unbounded. He now stood leaning against the pillar of his verandah, smoking a short clay pipe and clad in a very dirty shirt and tattered pair of trousers.

"I've watered the stock and looked 'em over," he announced, "and a durned nice mob they are. There's a bay down yonder with a blaze face and a white hind foot ought to be worth a hundred dollars ef he's worth a cent. But some of 'em's terrible footsore and most

all of 'em needs a good rest afore they're fit to trade. Where you bin?"

"Up to the depot to see the agent about a car-load of feed that's been on the road ten days," replied Jim, in the vernacular. "I want to set about getting the ponies into condition at once, they're only half-broken. By the way," he added, "I met Luxmoore up there, going north on business, and he asked me to go over and look after his wife while he's away. Says she's sick, poor little woman."

The old man grunted viciously.

"What did *you* say?" he asked abruptly. "Some-thin' darned foolish, of course."

Jim smiled carelessly. "Oh, I told him I'd do what I could. He's a good chap, old Luxmoore; married the wrong woman, I expect; but most men do that. I shall go round and see her this afternoon."

Uncle Billy blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air and showed his yellow teeth in an unpleasant grin.

"Then you've taken a durned sight bigger contract on hand than you reckon for," he answered. "See here, there's some cursed foolishness between her and a skunk of an actor boardin' up to Porter's Hotel, and I reckon every man in Maryville has caught on to it except her fool of a husband. You'd best not meddle with it unless you mean to go through."

"And suppose I do. What then?"

"Why, jest this. The man was half drunk in Macey's

saloon last night and more'n hinted that he wouldn't quit town alone. Bill Hartridge offered to bet drinks round that Cap' Luxmoore finds his house empty when he gets home."

Jim Scott's eyes contracted under their heavy brows and his mouth set in a thin determined line.

"Bill Hartridge is a damned fool," he said shortly, "and you may tell him I said so. Where are the boys?"

"Up to Macey's, gettin' drunk, I reckon."

"Then you can help to do their work; I expect you drove them out of here. I'm going to brand those ponies this morning, you'd better lend a hand."

There was something peremptory in the tone which appeared to afford Uncle Billy unbounded amusement, but he made no remark beyond a series of chuckles, and, knocking the ashes from his pipe, followed the cowboy in the direction of the paddock.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Jim Scott saddled one of his ponies and cantered off to pay his promised visit, but neither man had made the slightest allusion to their morning's conversation. They understood each other, and they did a very good day's work. The cowboy stopped on his way at Porter's Hotel and he had a brief conversation and a cocktail with the manager of that establishment. A quarter of an hour later he reached Captain Luxmoore's bungalow and

tying his pony's rein to the gate-post sauntered leisurely through the pretty little garden.

Kitty Luxmoore was seated in a long chair in the verandah reading an idiotic novel and dreaming impossible dreams born of its highly coloured romance. She started violently at his approach, dropping her handkerchief as she recovered herself and rose to greet him.

"I met your husband at the station this morning," said Jim cheerily. "And he told me I might come and call. It's a shame to sit indoors on such a lovely afternoon. Suppose we go down and try the lake for a fish. I've often said that I could teach you how to take more bass in an afternoon than you know what to do with, and the moon is in the right quarter to-day. What do you say?"

Kitty demurred at first, saying that she had a headache, and that the sun was much too hot for fishing, but ultimately Jim's persuasiveness carried the day, as was its wont, and a deftly worded eulogy of her sister's powers as an angler settled the matter. The reference to May interested her even more than the cowboy expected.

"Just show me where Luxmoore keeps his tackle," he said, "and I'll have everything ready while you are getting your hat. I know how long that takes."

Kitty laughed and went upstairs, but Jim stooped to pick up her handkerchief and a little note which his quick eye had discerned lying beneath it. Without

the slightest scruple, he deliberately read the latter through from beginning to end, and placed it in his pocket; but he dropped the handkerchief carelessly enough where he had found it. And when she came back in something under ten minutes she found her visitor whistling softly to himself over Captain Luxmoore's fishing box. She watched him, as with deft fingers he fashioned a strange lure, the like of which she had never seen. Amongst its component parts were a blue phantom minnow, the bright feathers of a monster salmon fly, a small shred of yellow ribbon, and the hairs of a deer's tail.

"What on earth are you going to do with that?" she asked.

"You're going to catch bass with it. I'm only going to pull the boat."

"But it isn't like anything in the world."

"Nor is a Florida bass. You must treat him as a freak of nature."

"But what does the fish take it for?" she persisted.

"I really don't know, but he takes it, as you'll ascertain directly. Are you ready? Then we'll begin while the sun is behind those clouds."

A few minutes later the light boat shot out from the bank, and even as it did so a slight ripple disturbed the surface of the smooth water. It was a curious bubbling wave that seemed to gather as it advanced, suddenly died away, and gathered again.

Jim's eye brightened. "Do you see that? It's a shoal of bass on the feed, and you'll see some fun. They'd take anything you showed them for the next half-hour; they'll simply *fight* for that gaudy little mouthful. Let out your line."

Kitty did as she was bid, and the cowboy pulled steadily over the rippling water. Scarcely had his companion run out her line before it was sharply tugged, and in half a minute a large bass was safely played and landed. "Let it out again," said Jim. Again the manœuvre succeeded, and another bass went to join his gasping companion. Three, four, and five followed quickly; then there came a lull. "We're out of the shoal," said the cowboy. "Now, watch the water closely till they move again."

A hundred yards to the left the water rippled once more, and the boat quickly glided over the spot; while two more fish paid the penalty of their curiosity.

"We're in for a good day," said Jim, as he disgorged the minnow for the seventh time, and patted it into shape. I wish May were here. How she would enjoy this."

Backwards and forwards they went, picking up a stray fish here and there, until the cowboy announced that the shoal was "played out." "Now we'll take a turn all round the shore, and see whether we can't find a few more on the feed in the shallow water," he added. And so they did with wonderful success, for though

Kitty lost as many fish as she landed, it was a very heavy creel which her companion deposited on the verandah when they returned to the house a couple of hours later for tea.

It was a cheerful little *tête-à-tête* meal, and her companion was just about to leave before Kitty found an opportunity in a casual reference to her sister to broach the topic in which she was deeply interested.

"You and May are great friends, aren't you?" she asked.

"I hope so," answered the cowboy.

"Then may I give you one little word of advice," she continued rather nervously. "It is not wise in Florida for a girl to get herself talked about, even when people have no ground for what they say, and you know how the English colony delight in talking scandal."

"I don't think I understand," said Jim Scott.

"People are talking about May and yourself," she continued, avoiding his eye. "She is my sister and you are my friend, and I thought it only right to warn you. It is not quite fair to her."

He looked straight into her face.

"Mrs Luxmoore," he said, "you can trust your sister and you can trust me. In a small community like this, people will always talk scandal more or less, but so long as the subject of it has nothing to reproach herself with, there is little harm done. In these matters a woman's conscience is her real and only safeguard."

He left her and rode pensively a short half-mile down the sandy road, halted his pony, and took a note from his pocket. He read it carefully through and whistled softly.

"No one but a woman would have thought of that," he muttered. "But, by Jove, she means business."

CHAPTER X

'FRISCO BLUFF

AMONGST the miscellaneous crowd which thronged the billiard-room of Macey's saloon that night, the most striking figure was undoubtedly that of Mr Cecil Featherstone, a distinguished ornament of the New York stage. Well-dressed and undoubtedly good-looking, in spite of a faint sneer which hung about his mouth, he stood out in strong contrast to the crowd of loafers who were consuming indifferent liquor at his expense. During his short stay in Maryville his easy manners and free-handed liberality had earned him a certain popularity of which he made the most. The vicissitudes of his profession had taught him to do that, for an actor who has been through the drudgery of provincial America rarely fails to adapt himself to the company into which he is thrown. And if he be in funds and whisky is cheap, the uneducated mass of bar-room loafers may speedily convert him into a hero.

To-night he was in his element, for he had established his supremacy at pool, and capped the broadest story current in those parts with another which did credit alike to his histrionic talent and his invention.

The scene was a typical Southern bar-room; such an one as may be seen nightly in any Florida township where the liquor prohibition laws have not found favour.

Surrounded by the implements of his trade, a perspiring bar-tender in doubtful shirt sleeves lounged behind his wooden barricade, with its background of fly-blown plate-glass. Facing him in various attitudes, more or less picturesque and unconventional, a dozen loafers consumed rye whisky and other poisonous compounds at brief intervals, and in the centre of the bar-room a billiard table with the easiest of cushions and widest of pockets engaged the attention of the rest.

Most of the men wore flannel shirts, open at the neck over their hairy chests, and there was a prevalence of dirty riding boots. Their hip-pockets exhibited a slight bulge, and they smoked for the most part cigars at five cents apiece retail. The atmosphere gave evidence conclusive of their rankness.

Cecil Featherstone made a winning hazard and took his second pool, paid for a round of drinks, and challenged the best player present to a game of billiards.

"No, Sirree," said Bill Hartridge, the man addressed, shaking his head with much decision. "There's only one man in this crowd can take your number down, and that's Jim Scott. He'll be on hand before a great

while, I reckon; and I'll go you a five-dollar bill you don't whip him if he's a mind to try."

"Never bet till I've seen a man's form," replied the actor. "Let's have another pool till the local prodigy turns up."

Ten minutes later Jim Scott appeared upon the scene and readily took up the challenge. But the actor would have been somewhat surprised had he suspected that a little note in his own handwriting reposed in the pocket of the coat which the cowboy handed to one of his friends while he carefully chalked his cue.

The game had not been long in progress before it became very evident that Featherstone had met with more than his match. Play as he might, his form was not to be compared with that of his adversary, who made shot after shot with the same consummate ease, and finally ran out a very easy winner, to the obvious satisfaction of Bill Hartridge.

And, truth to tell, the actor took his defeat in very good part, frankly acknowledging his own inferiority. One of the strongest traits in his character was a genuine pride in his profession, and he never lost an opportunity of studying human nature when presented to him in an unwonted type. In Jim Scott he recognised an impalpable something which raised him above the level of his cowboy associates, and he could not but mark the subtle deference which the latter

accorded him. Wherefore, nothing loath, he accepted fifty points in a hundred, and game succeeded game until the yawning bar-tender announced that it was closing time.

With a final round of drinks, the loafers separated; Cecil Featherstone and his new acquaintance leaving the bar-room together. The latter suggested that they should adjourn to the hotel and have a game of cards. "It is too early to turn in," he said with a smile.

"By all means," was the reply. "Come up to my room and I'll teach you the best game you ever played. I'm well supplied with whisky, and you certainly owe me my revenge. Not that it is any disgrace," he added with a courtesy which smacked somewhat of the profession, "to be beaten by so consummate an artist as yourself. I only stipulate for one thing. I'm bound to catch the six o'clock train north to-morrow morning, and though I'm well used to sitting up half the night, I hate an early start. So you must give me time for a few hours' sleep."

There was a curious smile on Jim's face as he acquiesced and followed his host upstairs.

The room which they entered, with its whitewashed walls and pine-wood furniture, was of the usual Florida hotel pattern. A small wood fire burned in the grate, a bedstead and wash-stand occupied one entire wall, and on the other side was a chest of drawers and a dressing table, placed as usual in the worst possible

light. In the centre, surrounded by luggage of various kinds half-packed in preparation for its owner's early departure, stood a square table on which lay a couple of packs of cards amidst a general litter which Featherstone speedily dispersed.

"We'll clear the decks for action," he said, suiting the action to the word. "There are the cards and here's the whisky. Fill your glass and we'll get to work."

He produced the bottle; together with that ubiquitous jug of iced water which figures so prominently in Southern hotel life, threw a log on the fire, lighted a cigar and took his seat. He was in his element. Cards, liquor, and an opportunity of studying character formed a combination after his own heart.

Shuffling the cards with a dexterity born of long practice, he expounded the rules of the game in short, abrupt sentences, punctuated by clouds of cigar smoke.

"We play with two packs, and the man who taught me the game called it 'Frisco Bluff.' . . . He was a Sacramento bar-tender, who had tried every form of gambling you ever heard of, and he said he'd never seen this beaten. . . . It's really a combination of poker and b  zique, for we declare our hands and make our points as we go along. But the beauty of it is that every time we lose we pay our money into the pool, and the devil only knows what it's worth when

we get to the finish. . . . And the man who takes the last trick scoops the pool and wins the game."

He gave a rapid explanation of the points to be scored, and asked his companion to name the stakes.

"Any points you like," he said. "The rules are simple enough, but the game's rather tricky. Better not make them too high."

Jim laid a large roll of bank notes on the table by his side.

"You know the game better than I do," he answered deliberately, "and you can tell about how far that will carry us. It's my limit. Arrange the stakes to suit it."

Featherstone laughed. "I'm afraid I should miss my train before one of us landed a sum like that. Your profession must be a more lucrative one than mine if you're ready to risk that amount of money on a game you've never played before."

"I'll take my chance," was the answer. "I never put up more than I can afford to lose. Besides, I won some of it from you at billiards. That was my game; this is yours; go ahead."

He cut the cards and sat back in his chair, pensively smoking, while the actor dealt them.

There was something in the situation which appealed very strongly to the cowboy's sense of humour. In possession of proof positive that it was his adversary's intention to leave Maryville by the morning train in

Kitty Luxmoore's company, his own promise to her husband was very strong within him. That one or other of them should miss that morning train he had thoroughly made up his mind, though he had laid no definite plan whatever to frustrate the intention. Meanwhile there appeared to be no necessity for hurry, or, indeed, for any immediate action. Circumstances were working out of themselves the furtherance of his object.

So the game progressed and the hours slipped by, whilst the whisky bottle waned and the glasses were filled and emptied time and again.

At two o'clock in the morning there was not fifty dollars between them, but the cowboy was the loser. Refilling his opponent's glass, he suggested that they should double the stakes. Featherstone acquiesced selected a fresh cigar from his case, threw an empty match box into the fire, and applied to the cowboy for a light. Jim took a piece of paper from his pocket, twisted it into a spill, and lighting it at the fire held it out to his companion. The latter quietly lit his cigar, and the game recommenced.

But a new element had entered into the contest.

It was probable that Featherstone had been drinking pretty steadily in the early part of the evening, and few men, under the circumstances, can consume large quantities of inferior whisky in the small hours of the morning without inconvenience.

The cowboy saw his chance and took it, plying the other with his own liquor to such purpose that it soon became obvious he was getting extremely drunk. From the stage of intense garrulity Featherstone dropped into the most confidential of moods, and babbled to his companion of his most intimate concerns. He bragged of his successes with women, hinted at the possibility of an approaching adventure with a grin which made Jim long to kick him, and on the verge of explanation relapsed into imbecile laughter, and emptying his glass with an unintelligible remark, fell forward against the table and finally subsided on to the floor, dead drunk.

Jim Scott laid his cards upon the table and looked at his watch with a smile. He was well aware that the stages of intoxication are many and various, but he knew that a man who is hopelessly overcome by rye whisky at three o'clock in the morning is in no condition to keep an appointment at half-past five, even for the purpose of an elopement. He leaned over the drunken man and shook him roughly without eliciting the slightest response; then he lit a cigarette and set to work.

First he carefully unpacked all the luggage in the room, placing the contents in the chest of drawers and the trunks under the bed. Then he picked up the helpless man in his arms as though he had been a child, undressed him, and put him to bed. Lastly he

extinguished the lamp and went out, locking the door on the outside and placing the key in his pocket. The accumulated stakes of the last pool he left untouched.

Strolling homewards in the cool grey of the morning, utterly unaffected by his own potations, the cowboy reflected on the satisfactory result of his night's work. By a mere accident he had been saved the necessity, for a time at least, of resorting to stronger arguments, albeit he was fain to admit that he would have had but little compunction in putting them into force.

Arrived at his temporary lodging, he battled with a very strong impulse to get into his saddle and go for a rattling gallop. But he reflected grimly that within a few hours he might be called upon for decisive action, and resisted it.

As he stooped to pull off his riding boots there came from an adjacent room the melodious sound of Uncle Billy's stertorous snores, and the cowboy summed up the situation in one of that eccentric philosopher's proverbs in the vernacular.

"There's more ways of killing a dog than choking him with butter," he remarked to himself as he rolled between the blankets.

CHAPTER XI

THE COWBOY'S RIDE

IT is a curious fact that the hours which he allots to sleep are usually in inverse proportion to a man's mental or physical activity. A cowboy in hard training is rarely to be found in bed after six o'clock, and Jim Scott was no exception to the rule. Shortly after that hour he had partaken of a cup of coffee brewed by Uncle Billy, and listened with an enigmatical smile to the voluble anathemas which that querulous old gentleman heaped upon his overnight companions, on gamblers in general and on actors in particular. To all these strictures the cowboy vouchsafed no attention beyond a mental appreciation of the old man's command of language; but on their conclusion he saddled one of his ponies and, lighting the inevitable cigarette, cantered off in the direction of Porter's Hotel.

As he hitched his rein to one of the posts provided for that purpose, and exchanged a morning greeting with the proprietor, Jim's ear caught the rumble of the Harrisburg train on her way north.

"She's late this morning," he remarked.

"Mostly is, five days of six," was the reply. "No

call to hurry, anyhow. The Jacksonville boat's bound to wait for her."

"It's the only through connection in the day," mused the cowboy.

"And a darned slow one at that," answered the other.

Jim smiled as he entered the hotel. He was easily amused this morning.

As he made his way upstairs to the scene of the little comedy, whose *dénouement* was beginning to interest him, he produced a key from his pocket, and—suddenly paused with a low whistle of surprise on the threshold of an empty room. The door stood wide open.

But there lay upon the dressing-table a double solution of the riddle; a door-lock neatly unscrewed from its frame and a pencilled note addressed to himself.

Despite his astonishment, he read it slowly through with a curious feeling of enjoyment. His sense of humour was very keen.

"You thought yourself devilish clever," ran the note, "when you put me to bed and locked my door this morning. But you forgot the profession of the man with whom you had to deal, and a Florida cowboy is not an exacting audience! Next time you steal a letter which is not addressed to you, you won't be fool enough to offer it to the writer as a light for his cigar.

What do you think of 'Frisco bluff? Don't forget the rules—the man who takes the last trick wins the game."

There was no signature, but the handwriting was particularly neat and not in the least like that of a drunken man.

"Damnation!" said Jim Scott.

He folded the note and slipped it into his pocket, and five minutes later the rattle of his pony's hoofs brought Uncle Billy to the door with the querulous enquiry, "What in thunder's up now?"

The question was not an unnatural one, for the cowboy hurriedly entered the house, and, stripping to the skin, was speedily engaged in applying to his nether limbs a strong solution of whisky and lemon juice. Uncle Billy stood looking on and sucked at his clay pipe in disgusted silence. He knew the symptoms.

Jim vouchsafed no word of explanation until he had struggled back into breeches and boots. Then he turned to his companion and asked abruptly—

"How far do you suppose a man could ride in ten hours for a bet?"

Uncle Billy knocked the ashes from his pipe and spat viciously into the empty fire-place.

"If he was made of cast-iron, and found a fresh pony when he killed the last, he'd maybe do sixty or seventy miles. If *you* had a mind to try, and you're durned fool enough for anything, I reckon you'd make

about eighty, if you didn't break your fool of a neck on the road.

The cowboy took down a bridle from a hook on the wall, and swung it pensively in his hand while he made for the door.

"I'll go you ten better," he said quietly. "It's about ninety miles from here to Jacksonville in a straight line. I'll bet you the pick of my drove against your Winchester rifle I get there before the Harrisburg boat comes alongside the quay at five o'clock this evening."

"That's a bet," said Uncle Billy, with an oath, as he followed the other into the paddock, and grunted his disapproval of the whole proceeding while the cowboy selected a little grey mare which he saddled with incredible quickness.

There was nothing specially prepossessing about the ragged hips and ewe neck of the animal, but Uncle Billy smiled grimly as he noted the wiry frame and game little head which harmonised so well with her owner's characteristics.

"She'll be feedin' buzzards to-night, more'n likely," he announced, as Jim led the mare round to the house, and slipping a flask and a revolver into his capacious pockets, vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"Tell the boys I have business in Jacksonville," he sang out, sitting motionless in the saddle while the half-broken animal reared straight up on end, and snatched wildly at her bridle. "I'll be back to-

morrow." And giving the mare her head he disappeared from view in a cloud of dust and cigarette smoke.

Uncle Billy leaned against the log fence for full five minutes in deep reflection. Then he pushed his battered hat back from his wrinkled forehead, and replaced his empty pipe in his pocket.

"There's bigger damned fools round town than Bil Hartridge," was his sage remark; "and I reckon Cap' Luxmoore and Jim Scott is two of them."

Heading due north at a swinging gallop, the grey mare and her rider cleared the little town and struck into a disused trail through the pine woods, making light of such minor obstacles as an occasional tree-trunk which here and there blocked the path. Given a good mount and the exhilaration of a possibly exciting issue, Jim Scott asked for no better amusement than that afforded by his reckless ride. He was one of those men beneath whose quiet exterior there lurks a latent fund of energy, who revel in a situation which demands physical action, and are never happier than when faced by a crisis which taxes muscle and intellect alike. The cleverness which had outwitted him appealed more strongly than he knew to some inner sense, and on the impulse of the moment he had seen but one possible course of action, and unhesitatingly adopted it. The probable sequel barely troubled

his mind, but the determination to succeed was very strong within him. To the rhythmical swing of his pony's hoofs there beat within his brain one ever-recurring sentence—"The man who takes the last trick wins the game."

Mile after mile they covered at a pace growing steadier as the sun climbed slowly upward in the cloudless sky, while the black shadows of the pine trees outlined themselves ever more sharply across the track, sometimes slacking their pace to ford a creek swollen by recent rains; now scattering a bevy of quail which rose with a whirr and flutter of wings to settle again in the safe shelter of a dense hammock a hundred yards away; now passing a cracker shanty whose owner greeted the flying pair with a bovine stare of listless astonishment; and again speeding through a nigger settlement to the consternation of a troop of half-naked children wallowing animal-like in the sandy road.

Mile after mile, ever northward, till the shelter of the trees grew less and less, and the sun beat down with pitiless force on the mare's quivering flanks and her rider's broad shoulders; till the sandy track gave place to a growth of scrub and wire-grass, and they emerged at last on a broad and level prairie stretching away far as the eye could reach in a perspective of flat monotony, only broken here and there by a clump of cabbage palmetto, or stunted lightwood tree.

Ridden at headlong speed in the glare of a semi-tropical sun, the gamest of ponies must succumb at last, and Jim took a cautious pull when he felt his mount roll ominously as she blundered almost to her knees over a gopher hole hidden in the treacherous wire grass. Her cat-like activity just saved him a rattling fall, and he scanned the horizon anxiously.

"Bill Mason's lot ought to be somewhere hereabouts," he muttered, "if they mean to make Tallahassee tomorrow and didn't get on a spree last night. I hope they've got a galloper amongst them, for the little mare's about played out."

And so, indeed, she was, for she hung heavily on his hand as she pounded along with shortened stride and reeking coat, and nothing but the dogged gameness of her sex and her rider's judicious handling kept her going at all. But her troubles were nearly at an end, for just as the cowboy had determined to shape his course for an outlying settlement which would have entailed an extra three-mile journey, his eye lighted on the object of his quest.

In the scant shelter afforded by a tuft of scrub oak, growing oasis-like in the desert of surrounding prairie, a herd of twenty cattle and half as many ponies were discontentedly cropping the parched grass which shaded off from brown to green in the vicinity of a tiny lake. The grey mare pricked her ears and attempted a feeble whinny as she rapidly approached them.

Signs of a recent encampment were not wanting in the shape of a burnt-out fire and sundry cooking utensils, but there was never a human being in sight. It was evident that "the boys" had betaken themselves on a hunting or fishing expedition in the neighbourhood, leaving their charges to await their return. The absence of the lawful owners in nowise disconcerted the galloping cowboy. All he wanted was a horse, and with customary promptitude he decided on annexing one.

"Exchange is no robbery," he reflected, "and they'll know my brand as soon as they see it. They couldn't hurry those cattle if they wanted to, and the mare will hold her own with the best of them when she's had a couple of hours' rest."

And he ranged alongside the most likely-looking of Bill Mason's stud with intent to capture.

But the pony, a sleek little stallion of typical Florida breed, declined all attempts at cajolment and took to his heels with flying mane and tail, cantering round in small circles like a playful puppy.

There was no time to lose; fast as he had come, Jim knew full well that he had his work cut out if he meant to reach his goal, and he was not the type of man to do a thing by halves. Unwinding the long rope which ornamented the raised pommel of his cowboy saddle, he carefully looped and coiled it, and catching the little mare hard by the head, gave chase.

It was over in less than a minute; for one brief moment the pair raced neck and neck; the cowboy raised his right arm with a quick jerking action, and the rope flashed in the sun to fall in a neat loop round the stallion's neck. Game to the last, the grey mare answered the pressure of her rider's knees and braced herself for the shock, only to blunder on her nose and roll over on her side with a groan as Jim sprung lightly to the ground. With one hand he hastily loosened her girths, while his quarry plunged and snorted at the end of the rope which he held in the other.

Two minutes more whilst he shifted saddle and bridle, lighted a cigarette, and swung himself on to his remount, and by the time the mare had struggled to her feet with a snort and a shake he was half a mile away and galloping at a pace which bid fair to make up for loss of time. The stallion bucked and plunged along in a manner which would have disconcerted many a good horseman, but which failed to make the slightest impression on the cowboy's iron grip, so long as he kept his head in the required direction.

"Go ahead, my son," he said with a smile. "You won't have much buck left when you get to the end of your stage."

And he certainly had not, for he was in a lather from head to tail and "cooked to a turn," as Jake Summers remarked when he looked him over a few hours later, roused from his midday sleep by the "coo-ee" of his

friend the cowboy, who galloped up to the little homestead some seventy miles north of Maryville at two o'clock in the afternoon.

"I want the best horse you've got in your stable, Jake," he said, in answer to the other's query; "something that will carry me into Jacksonville before five o'clock this evening. Give me a snack and something to drink while your boy shifts the saddle. I've only ten minutes to spare and I've got a thirst you could photograph!"

In little more than the specified time he emerged from the house to find his third mount, a redoubtable black racing pony which Jake valued above all his earthly possessions, fretting and plunging to the no small discomfiture of the negro boy who willingly resigned his fractious charge.

"You'll never do it, old man," said Summers, as he watched the cowboy tighten a girth and get into the saddle. "It's thirty miles round by the head of Clear Water Lake, and there's no other road you can take. The floods have washed away the bridge on Shingle Creek, and there isn't another place where the devil himself could get across it."

"The deuce they have," was the answer. "We'll have to swim the old cattle ford. It saves a mile, anyway. But I'm glad you told me, for I'd have wasted a quarter of an hour looking for the bridge. What's the matter?"

The look of horror on his hearer's face was positively pathetic.

"You'll drown the pony, Jim," he said, piteously. "And yourself too," he added as an afterthought.

The cowboy leaned from the saddle, and he spoke a little more earnestly than his wont.

"When I say I must be in Jacksonville at five o'clock, you know I mean it; and if I'm alive, I'll do it. If you don't find your pony in Moore's stable at the other end to-morrow morning as fit as he is now, name your own price and I'll buy him. If we both go down, send in your claim to Uncle Billy, and tell him I promised. He'll curse you like a pickpocket, but you'll get your money just the same."

"It's not the money, Jim; but where's the sense of it? What are you going for, anyhow?"

"Call it a bet," was the answer; and, without waiting for further remonstrance, the cowboy left the homestead at a gallop on the last stage of his journey. Half an hour later he pulled up on the bank of the old cattle ford on Shingle Creek.

It was not an inviting place at the best of times; and to-day, for all his iron nerve, the cowboy wished himself well on the other side.

Swollen by recent rains, the creek had overflowed its banks, and now came swirling down in a seething yellow torrent, sweeping along in its course branches, logs, and *débris* collected on its impetuous journey. The

cattle ford, which had been passable enough before the operation of reclaiming a tract of low-lying land had deepened and broadened the creek, was one of its shallowest but widest places.

Jim marked with his eye the spot on the further side where the bank would afford the firmest foothold. Allowing for the current, he rode a few yards higher up, as far as the thick scrub would permit, and, swinging his feet clear of the stirrups, urged his pony down the steep bank.

The frightened animal paused, trembling in every limb and snorting loudly; one moment he hesitated while the rotten foothold crumbled beneath his feet; the next he was swimming for his life.

Motionless in the centre of his saddle, with the reins hanging loosely on the pony's neck, Jim sat like a rock, knowing that an incautious movement might drown them both, and revelling in the momentary exhilaration of the danger.

Once the end seemed very near. A huge log came swirling down upon them, and the sturdy little animal beneath him made a prodigious effort to escape it. The pony's head went under as the floating mass grazed his flank, and the plunge which followed drenched the cowboy to the shoulders; but he struggled bravely on, carried by the current far below the sound landing on the opposite side, till he touched bottom at last under a steep pitch in the

bank where an eddy sucked back under a cypress tree whose branches missed braining the rider by a hair's-breadth.

There was no help for it. Burdened as he was, it was beyond the animal's power to gain a footing. Jim was compelled perforce to slip off into the water with a rein in his hand before the pony could make an effort to extricate himself. There came a splash and a tremendous scramble; an instant's hideous indecision as it seemed that he must fall backwards into the stream, and a final plunge on the steep bank.

Then, with a snort and a struggle on the very verge of collapse, the pride of Jake Summers's stable stood once more on *terra firma*.

Jim led him into the open, turned his head upwind, slacked his girths, and washed out his mouth while he patted the reeking neck.

"Well done, my lad," he said. "It was touch and go that time!"

There was a grim smile on his determined face, but his heart was beating very fast. He looked at his dripping garments and the empty flask with a sigh.

"Damn that actor," he muttered.

CHAPTER XII

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

THE Harrisburg boat was even later than usual that evening ; and Jim Scott, seated on an inverted sugar barrel on the Jacksonville quay with a cigarette between his lips, found time to lament the discomfort born of saturated riding breeches only partially dried in the sun.

Knee-deep in the straw of Moore's most comfortable loose-box, the black pony was placidly enjoying his well-earned supper.

And two miles down stream a paddle wheel steamer was emitting clouds of thick black smoke as she steadily neared her destination.

Side by side on the deck of the vessel two of the passengers approached their journey's end with widely different feelings. It was strongly characteristic of the man that Cecil Featherstone's chief thought was still one of elation at his own cleverness in out-manceuvring his antagonist of the night before. But even this reflection was tempered by the inevitable reaction which sometimes attacks even the most unprincipled of libertines. The practice of analysing his emotions,

albeit one of the secrets of an actor's success in his profession, has its undoubted disadvantages in private life. In his communings with that which did duty for his conscience Cecil Featherstone was perfectly honest. Therefore he did not hesitate to admit to himself that his present victory had been a cheaply earned one. A weak-minded woman, piqued by the apparent indifference of a husband whom she does not understand, and bored to distraction with her surroundings, is an easy enough conquest to the man who has learned to read those outward symptoms which vary so very little. And, as is the case with most things which have been cheaply gained, the process of disillusion is speedy and inevitable.

In every phase of life the rule obtains. The fruit which looks so strangely tempting as it hangs a bare six inches beyond the schoolboy's grasp loses something of its bloom when once he has succeeded in handling it. And even the schoolboy realises sometimes that there may be unexpected difficulties in the disposal of a prize whose chief merit lay in the fact of its being apparently out of his reach. It occurred to Cecil Featherstone that he was very much in that schoolboy's predicament.

To Kitty Luxmoore, now that the irrevocable step had been taken, had come an intense revulsion of feeling. Woman-like she had sacrificed her future and forfeited her reputation for the unreasoning gratifica-

tion of a hysterical impulse, and woman-like she clearly realised all too late the nature of her infatuation and its consequence. And, face to face with the crisis of her life, that strange mesmeric power which a strong will can assert over a weak nature suddenly carried her thoughts to Jim Scott.

The man at her side stooped to speak to her, and she started from him with a shiver of disgust which brought an angry frown to his face. At the same moment a bell clanged and a whistle blew, there was a rush of passengers on deck, and amidst a babel of voices and the confusion of disembarkation the vessel slowed down and came alongside the quay.

Almost the last to leave the boat, Kitty made her way mechanically along the gangway plank, her eyes fixed upon the ground. But she gave no start, evinced no sign of surprise, as the tall cowboy advanced to meet her, gravely removing his broad felt hat as he took the small hand-bag she carried from her passive grasp. Only a deep sigh of relief escaped her; instinctively she had *felt* that he was there.

He spoke very quietly, his eyes looking straight into her own; ignoring her companion as completely as though he had been one of the negro deck-hands floundering around them amidst a chaos of bales and boxes.

"I have ordered supper for you at the hotel," he said, "and I have taken your ticket by the Harrisburg

boat which leaves here at eight o'clock to-night. We shall travel together."

For one moment he kept his eyes upon her face till the weak little mouth began to quiver and the blue eyes to fill. Then, with studied carelessness, he turned to Featherstone, standing so that his broad form entirely shielded her from the latter's view.

The actor's face was not a pleasant one to look upon; nothing but his stage training could have kept his voice within reasonable control.

"You shall settle with me for this," he said between his clenched teeth.

"I intend to," was the deliberate reply.

They made their way in silence through the town, and the cowboy was the only one of the trio who was entirely at his ease. All three realised that he was absolute master of the situation.

At the door of the Duval Hotel they were met by an obsequious waiter who, evidently acting on instructions, showed them into a private room. Simultaneously Kitty and Featherstone noted that the table was laid for two. Though natural enough on reflection, the detail made a curiously strong impression on them both.

"Supper in ten minutes," said Jim to the waiter. The man bowed and disappeared. The cowboy turned to Featherstone and touched him lightly on the

shoulder. "You want to speak to me," he said; "will you come upstairs."

He led the way to an empty room on the floor above, holding the door open for the other to enter and locking it on the inside. Then he walked across to the window and threw it wide open, pausing for an instant to look into the crowded street below.

"Now," he said, as he turned and confronted Featherstone, "I have ten minutes at your disposal."

His coolness placed the actor at an obvious disadvantage. It redoubled the sense of his own utter impotence and his temper momentarily got the better of him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he burst out.

"Waiting for your explanation," was the quiet reply.

"Explanation! Do you think I'm going to give you an explanation? What the deuce do you mean by interfering in my business at all? You begin by stealing a letter which is no concern of yours, then you abuse my hospitality and lock me into my own room, and now by some infernal miracle you turn up here and ask me for an explanation. What do you mean by it?"

"I will tell you exactly what I mean," was the deliberate answer. "Yesterday morning Luxmoore entrusted his wife to my care and I undertook the charge. Men who know me will tell you that I never go back on my word. I could not save her from her-

self, but I can from you ; and I intend to do it. I shall take her back to Maryville to-night."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," was the angry retort. "Mrs Luxmoore came here with me of her own free will and with me she intends to stay. You can go to Maryville or to the devil for anything I care, but you'll go alone."

"I think not," said the cowboy.

There was a long minute's silence while the two men confronted one another, and the actor felt that the position was a desperate one. He was by no means destitute of a certain physical pluck, but he realised that his present attitude was not a dignified one, and his habitual self-confidence was rapidly deserting him under his adversary's unflinching gaze. He passed his hand over his face to hide the quiver of his mouth. Jim did not fail to notice the symptom or to understand it. But he made no remark.

It was Featherstone who was perforce compelled to break the irksome silence.

"Don't think that you can frighten me," he said, "for you can't. I don't intend to have my business interfered with by anybody, certainly not by you, and I'm not going to be bounced by a man who condescends to steal a woman's letter !"

Jim smiled. "That letter seems to rankle," he said.

"Do you know my opinion of a man who reads a letter that is not addressed to him ?"

"No, I don't; but if you take my advice you will keep it to yourself. Look here, Featherstone, we're only wasting time. I haven't ridden a hundred miles to argue a question of morality with you, and if I had we probably should not agree. But I've told you what I intend to do and I'm waiting for your decision. Will you go quietly or not?"

"No, I won't. I've stood your infernal impertinence long enough and I defy you to interfere further with my business. I am going downstairs to speak to Mrs Luxmoore; open that door at once."

"No."

The single syllable came very quiet and distinct, but the attitude of the speaker betokened that he was in no mood for further trifling.

The actor's breath came quick and short; he realised the absurdity of a physical struggle with the man who defied him, but matters had reached a climax. He made a step forward and faced the cowboy with a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

"It is easy enough for a man of your size to bully and threaten," he hissed. "Are you prepared to give me satisfaction?"

"Certainly; I can meet you after to-morrow wherever and whenever you choose. Name your time and place. I will be there."

"I don't believe you would come."

"That's not true. You know I would."

"Then why not settle it here and now?"

"For several reasons. Chiefly because Mrs Luxmoore's name would be mixed up with yours, and I don't intend that it should."

"I intend to speak to her before I leave the hotel. You understand that?"

"I'm afraid I can't allow it. She has gone through quite enough for one day. If I open that door you must promise to leave the house at once. Next time we meet you shall dictate your own terms, for the present you will find it wise to do as you are told."

Featherstone's face was distorted with anger. His utter impotence beside this big imperturbable man made him perfectly furious. In his reckless rage he made a dangerous mistake.

"So I'm to leave the lady in your hands," he sneered; "leave you to carry out what I've begun. You think that because she's in your power——"

He had gone a little too far. Jim laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder and he winced with pain beneath its grip.

"Finish that sentence," said the cowboy, "and, by God, I'll throw you through that window into the street."

There was a concentrated force in his tone which left no doubt whatever in his hearer's mind of his power and intention to carry the threat into execution. Even in his discomfiture the actor could not resist a passing

gleam of satisfaction at having goaded him beyond his self-control. But he had no intention of being thrown out of a window, and he surrendered at discretion.

"If I were a man of your own size," he said quite coolly, "you would not dare to threaten me. Unfortunately I have no alternative for the moment except to yield to brute force. But when my turn comes I shall not spare you. Now, perhaps you will unlock the door and allow me to pass."

For a man mortally wounded in his vanity it was a fairly dignified exit, despite the melodramatic tone of the concluding speech. With head erect and chest expanded, the actor marched downstairs and into the street.

He had taken his opponent's measure with an alacrity born of long sojourn in a land where a man's claim to respect is founded rather on the accuracy of his aim than upon his moral qualities; where human passions, guiltless of the decent cloak of civilisation, stalk forth naked and unashamed.

And even as he went he realised, with a vague sense of relief, that he had suddenly shaken off a heavy burden. For between desire and possession there is a wide gulf fixed.

In the room below Kitty Luxmoore sat waiting. Every moment seemed an eternity of suspense to her, and she longed for Jim's return almost as much as she dreaded the explanation which must follow.

She heard the opening of the door on the landing above and the sound of footsteps on the stairs. They passed along the passage and she crept to the window, standing half-hidden behind the heavy curtains. She saw her lover pass into the street alone.

Then another footstep on the stairs, and the sitting-room door opened. In an agony of shame and of remorse the woman waited, with flaming cheeks and downcast eyes.

The cowboy carefully closed the door behind him, crossing the room and laying his hand gently on her shoulder. He did not seek to look into her face.

"Mrs Luxmoore," he said quite quietly, "both your husband and your sister are very old friends of mine, and perhaps you think that I have traded on that friendship. But if my methods are rough you must forgive me ; I'm afraid it is my nature that is to blame."

Kitty looked up quickly and tried to speak, but she could not frame the words. And Jim continued, still with averted eyes, almost as though speaking to himself.

"There are episodes in all our lives that we are glad to forget, and sometimes one of us stumbles accidentally on another's secrets. Then we have a chance of proving our friendship and our right to be trusted. I want you to trust me. I should be very glad to think that we shall always be good friends."

It was delicately done. Something in tone and

manner even more than mere words conveyed the impression of one who asks, rather than confers, a favour.

The woman was deeply touched ; impulsively she held out her hand while the tears gathered in her eyes.

"I think you are the best friend I ever had," she answered brokenly.

He held the small hand for a moment between both his own.

"Thank you," he answered simply.

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE FLOOD

WHATEVER may have been their private opinion of their chief's expedition and its object, none of his satellites ventured to discuss it with Jim Scott on his return. Experience had taught them that it was unwise to interfere with his private concerns, and they rested content in the knowledge that they should remain in their present quarters till the end of the week. Meanwhile, their pay was good, and Macey's whisky cheap and potent. Beyond that they had no immediate cares; and the loss of a good berth was too high a price to pay for the doubtful satisfaction of an idle curiosity.

Even Uncle Billy made no comment. The first time he found himself alone with Jim he unslung his cherished Winchester from its hook on the wall and tendered it to the cowboy.

"I suppose you won her!" he said.

There was something almost pathetic in his affection for the ancient weapon.

Jim laughed. "I rather think I did," he answered.

The old man thrust his hands into his pockets and slouched out of the house.

"Uncle Billy," called Jim; and he came slowly back.

The cowboy handed him the weapon with a smile.

"Keep the rifle, old man, and hold your tongue," he said.

Uncle Billy stared at him for a moment in surprise. Slowly his features relaxed, and he held out an enormous dirty hand.

"Shake," he grunted.

And that same night Bill Hartridge, commenting in the old man's hearing on Jim's frequent visits to the Bungalow, was surprised to find himself assailed with a torrent of the choicest abuse.

"He's a durned sight better up to the Bungalow than foolin' round a billiard table with a set of drunken galoots like you," was Uncle Billy's peroration. "You think yerself a mighty smart man, Bill Hartridge, but yer nothin' better 'en a dog-goned whisky-soaker. I wouldn't hire a man like you to shovel sand down a gopher hole!"

His hearer subsided. He felt himself unequal to the occasion.

During the week which Jim spent in Maryville no message came to him from Cecil Featherstone; a fact which somewhat surprised him, for he had not looked upon the actor as a man likely to let the matter drop. Nor was he altogether mistaken in his estimate.

Meanwhile, the only immediate outcome of his ride

was the adjustment of a misunderstanding between Bill Mason and Jake Summers as to the manner in which the former's pony had come into the latter's possession. In his hurry Jim had entirely forgotten to give any explanation, wherefore Jake had flatly declined to return the animal to its lawful owner.

It was not without the exercise of some little diplomacy that the two worthies were finally led to drown their difference at the bar of Macey's saloon; but they ultimately left at midnight in one another's company, vowing eternal friendship. And Jim, in furtherance of his promise, patiently awaited Luxmoore's return.

The latter's journey had been in every sense a fortunate one. The successful transaction of his bank's business had placed him in a position to make arrangements for the visit to England, from which, on his wife's behalf, he hoped for so much. And the change of scene and occupation had turned his thoughts into a new channel, and taken him somewhat out of the narrow, everyday groove. Refreshed in mind and body, he came back full of a strong determination to establish a better understanding with the woman whom, in his heart, he really loved.

To his surprise she was waiting on the platform to receive him; came forward to greet him with a smile and a kiss, which brought to his careworn face an expression she had almost forgotten.

"Kitty," he whispered, "I believe you are glad to see me."

"Oh, Tom," she answered earnestly, "if you only knew how glad."

The tears were very near her eyes, and there was an ominous tremble in her voice; but, manlike, he misunderstood it. It was not in his nature to probe beneath the surface of a woman's whim.

But outside the station, busy to all appearance with his pony's girths, Jim Scott marked their meeting. He knew full well how much depended upon it, and, with a tact which did him infinite credit, he diverted Luxmoore's attention at a very critical moment.

Coming forward with a cheery greeting he manœuvred himself cleverly into a position between the two, maintaining it with that apparent carelessness and deliberate intention with which a leading actor takes the centre of the stage. And even as the actor gives his fellow player an important cue, he spoke his words very distinctly.

"We've been having no end of fun since you went away. Caught all the fish in your lake; been for a ride every morning; and had a race from here to Jacksonville."

"To Jacksonville?" was the astonished rejoinder.

"Yes. I maintained that I could ride there faster than your wife could travel in that lumbering old

steamer, so we made a match and I won it by a quarter of an hour!"

Standing broad and erect between the husband and wife he hid them from each other's view, as he bent over the former and dropped his voice.

"I thought a little change would do her good, and I had to go up on business in any case."

It was a bold move and a successful one, albeit the cowboy's conscience smote him as Luxmoore wrung his hand.

"I knew that I could trust you, Jim," he said. "You must come round to the Bungalow to-night and have a chat."

"Certainly I will. I'm off to Orangeville to-morrow morning, and I want to teach you a new card game before I go." He went on speaking rapidly, intent on keeping his hearer's attention fixed. "The man who taught it me called it 'Frisco bluff, and it's worth learning. The rules are too long to explain to you now, but the great beauty of it is that the money accumulates as you go along and you find you're playing for a bigger stake than you'd imagine at the finish."

With the corner of his eye he noted that he had gained his end. Kitty had found time to recover her self-possession; and he swung himself on to his pony, lingering over his last sentence as though he liked its flavour.

"It's a good game, and the man who takes the last trick wins the pool."

But even as he cantered down the sandy road he caught himself wondering whether that last trick had indeed been finally turned and scored.

Meanwhile, in the English colony his return was very anxiously awaited. Despite her confidence in the man she loved, May Allison realised to the full the delicacy of the mission with which she had entrusted him. Sometimes she wondered whether she ought to feel ashamed that it was not only for her sister's sake she longed to see Jim Scott again. That she did long to see him she never attempted to conceal from herself.

Her anxiety was not in any degree shared by Arthur Manners. That young gentleman, having undergone the pleasant preliminary symptoms of falling in love with the girl who had become his constant companion, had reached a very acute stage of the malady. Striving in vain to console himself with the reflection that there should be safety in the very number of May's admirers, his strong common sense clearly showed him that he had only one to fear. He knew that the girl was in love with Jim Scott, and the sting of his annoyance lay in the fact that his own personal liking for the man prevented him from being thoroughly and properly jealous. The position struck him as somewhat ludicrous.

For it may be incomprehensible, and it is certainly difficult of explanation, but the fact remains that there exists a subtle something in the Florida atmosphere which has the power of teaching both men and women that knowledge of things as they are, which comes, in less ardent climates, only with long years of experience. A native-born maiden of fifteen summers has learned—for good or evil—more than her English sister may even guess at after her second London season. Wearisome as the reiteration of this peculiarity may become, it is a factor so important in those lives which its spell affects as to be necessarily insisted upon.

A man's mind receives its impressions more slowly, in that his outlook is tempered by judgment where the woman's is coloured by impulse, but none the less certainly does he absorb the subtle poison. To the general rule Arthur Manners was no exception.

All unconscious of the developments unrolling themselves beneath his very eyes, May's short-sighted parent still devoted the greater portion of his time to the elaboration of his photographic failures. Gradually the working of the property had devolved upon his pupil, and the pretence of instruction, which Allison had found very irksome at the outset, had long since been tacitly ignored by both. But there was no denying that the financial outlook was unpromising in the extreme, for the orange trees, slowly recovering from the effects of the winter frost, held out but small

hopes of immediate profit. So the mortgage had been renewed at an increased rate of interest, and with the renewal had come a subtle and noticeable change in Silas Marks's demeanour.

The land agent, after the manner of his type, began to show his hand. His original deference, assumed rather from calculation than natural delicacy, waned as he felt his position strengthening. With Allison himself he affected a tone of familiarity which the latter was quite unable to check, and Marks was far too thick-skinned to heed the fact that May was beginning to shrink from his society.

For his present purpose it was quite sufficient that he had become an absolute necessity to the maintenance of the household, and established his right to visit there as often as his inclination prompted.

It was at this juncture that Jim returned from Maryville, arriving as he had done many a time before, at the hour of the evening meal. A shrill whistle announced his advent, and Manners did not fail to note the light that leaped into May's eyes as she heard it.

"Hullo!" he said. "Who's that?"

"I think it is Jim Scott," answered the girl demurely.

"I hope so," said her father, pensively poising his knife and fork in mid air while his eye rested on a recently developed negative at his side.

The cowboy was in excellent spirits, and much more talkative than his wont. He discussed photography with his host, and the events of the recent gymkhana with Arthur Manners the while he plied his knife and fork with an appetite sharpened by the contrast to Uncle Billy's humble fare. He enquired after Chipmonk, commented on the effects of the frost among the southern groves, dilated on the merits of his newly-broken drove of ponies, and generally carried on the burden of the conversation.

And after supper he sat down for an hour or more at the piano, playing and singing snatches of half-forgotten comic operas, the successes of former London seasons, until the hour grew late, and the moonlight struck across the verandah and he suddenly rose to go.

"I've got ten miles to ride to-night," he said. "It's time I was off."

May went with him to the door.

"I'm coming to the stable with you," she said. "You can't go without seeing Chipmonk."

And Arthur Manners ground his teeth behind the advertisement sheet of an English *Field* which he had already perused from one end to the other.

It was a lovely night. Bathed in the soft witchery of the moonlight there is a subtle mysterious charm about Florida's commonplace scenery which must be seen to be appreciated. The trying noon day heat has given place to that cool evening breeze which springs

up with twilight and dies away with dawn, and the shadows of the orange trees take dim soft outlines on which the eye dwells gratefully. Over it all there hangs a strange hushed silence, unaccountable and unexplained, which prompts men and women to speak in lowered voices. Something is brooding above the land which instinct warns them must not be disturbed.

Both of them felt it, and May noticed with a curious wonder the sudden change in her companion's manner. The rare smile hovered still about his mouth, but his eyes were grave and thoughtful even beyond their wont.

Scarcely a word they spoke until Jim had saddled his pony and they stood together at the white-washed gate where, months before, he had stopped his song to greet her. The girl broke the silence.

"Jim ;" she said ; "have you nothing to tell me about Kitty?"

"Yes, I have. She sends you her love and she wants to know how soon you can go and stay with her."

"Do you think she really means it?"

"I know she does."

"When did Tom come back?"

"Yesterday. I dined with them last night."

"And is that all—you—have to tell me?"

"I think so. Isn't it enough?"

She looked straight into his eyes and for a full half-

minute they returned her gaze, unwavering and unfathomable.

"Jim," she whispered; "was I mistaken about Kitty?"

And he answered steadily.

"Yes. You were mistaken."

Into her face there leaped a sudden light which more than repaid him for the lie.

"What a good friend you've been," said the woman.

"What a pretty girl you are," answered the man.

And there, in the breathless moonlight, came that moment which must come sooner or later in the history of every human life; the moment wherein the training of long years breaks down before the sudden unreasoning impulse of a second. For somewhere amidst the joints of the best proven harness there lurks a vulnerable spot, and the resistance even of the strongest chain is equal only to its weakest link.

The blushing face in the moonlight was strangely winsome and very near his own. One moment he hesitated; then human nature conquered and he made a grave mistake.

He stooped and kissed her.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAYOR OF ORANGEVILLE

IN a newly developed country, where a twelvemonth may convert a nameless hamlet into a thriving city and an unscrupulous pauper into a respected millionaire, the march of events is scarcely more rapid than is the growth of human ambitions.

Six months after the events of the great gymkhana, Silas Marks was in a position to congratulate himself on the progress of his most cherished schemes. The Mayor of Orangeville felt that he had established his reputation.

The room in which he sat alone was the library of his villa, on the outskirts of the city ; and it was furnished with an ostentation typical of the man who has amassed a fortune without the necessary taste to temper the expenditure of his wealth. Everything in the house cried aloud for a woman's refining influence.

Vaguely realising his requirement, he had that very morning bargained to obtain it. On the table before him lay the instrument which he had used, a mortgage deed in which the name of John Allison figured as victim.

Of the ultimate results of that interview the land agent had no doubt whatsoever; it was a question merely of time. Like every clever schemer, he was a patient man, and had long since learned to bide his time. Having once sown the seed, he was content to await its fructification in due season.

Locking the document away in his desk, he lighted a cigar and seated himself beside the wood fire which crackled cheerily in the grate, giving himself over to his meditations with the inborn satisfaction of one who has done a good day's work and knows it. The pictures which he saw amidst the glowing pine logs were pleasant in the extreme, and they included, amongst other things, a charming wife.

It was characteristic of the man that he smoked without drinking, contrary to the Southern practice of those who spend their evenings alone. But Marks never gave away a chance.

Gradually his dreams of the future gave place to the records of his achievements in the past, for he belonged to that unimaginative type which dwells on accomplished successes as the portent of future undertakings. Mentally he compared the city of his own creation with the Porterstown of three years ago.

The "Phenomenal City," as the *Orangeville Reporter* loved to describe it, had thriven indeed beyond its projector's most sanguine dreams, albeit the aforesaid journal probably overestimated its population at ten

thousand souls. Its mammoth hotel was the favourite resort of yearly increasing crowds of wealthy Northern idlers; leading theatrical companies vied with one another for a two nights' engagement in its Grand Opera House; tramways intersected its streets; telephone wires bristled overhead; and its public buildings and system of waterworks were alike the envy and despair of all Southern competitors.

And he, Silas Marks, the leading banker of the State, proprietor of hotel and Opera House alike, managing director of the Florida Extension Railway, and Mayor of Orangeville, was the man to whose brains, energy and capital——

A sharp ring at the door-bell broke in upon his *rêverie*. Idly wondering who his late visitor might be, he suddenly remembered that he was alone in the house. The Bijou Opera Company were paying their annual visit to the town, and he had given his small household free passes for the play. It was a cheap method of purchasing the popularity for which he craved, an opportunity such as he never missed. Rising slowly from his comfortable chair, he flung his half-smoked cigar into the fire and opened the door in person.

A man, standing on the threshold, entered hurriedly, nervously.

"Mr Marks, I reckon," he said.

The mayor bowed and motioned him towards the

library. But as his visitor passed into the lamplight Marks started violently and with difficulty restrained an exclamation.

Almost immediately he recovered himself, and a moment later followed him into the room, cool, wary and collected as was his wont.

The man had taken a chair opposite the writing-table, and sat fumbling nervously with his soft felt hat. The mayor quietly turned the reading lamp so that its light fell full upon the other, leaving himself in partial shadow. Then he seated himself at the table and attentively studied the intruder's face.

It was a strange face, prematurely aged and surmounted by a straggling growth of long white hair. Deep grooved and wrinkled as it was, there was something in the dazed, wistful expression of the eyes that was almost boyish. Peering out from under their shaggy brows they conveyed an impression that their owner's weak intellect was ever concentrating itself in the endeavour to fix some subject in his mind. They were the eyes of a man occupied in an unceasing effort to grasp an ever-elusive clue.

"My name's Mullins," he said weakly. "Dan Mullins, from Philadelphia."

He gazed helplessly across the table, and continued abruptly.

"They tell me you're the smartest man in South Florida. I thought maybe you could help put me on

the track of a scoundrel I've been huntin' for most four years."

The mayor smiled a gracious acknowledgment of the compliment to his own astuteness. His quick brain had grasped the situation; and he knew his man. But there was no sign of recognition in the face that looked blankly into his own.

"I shall be glad to assist you so far as lies within my power," he answered encouragingly. "Perhaps you will tell me your story from the beginning."

Pushing his hair back from his forehead, the man took up his tale, speaking in the monotonous tone of one who is repeating a lesson long since learnt by heart.

"It's most four years since I first concluded to try my luck down South. There was two of us, me and Ned Simmonds. We was clerks in a Philadelphia store where wages wasn't much account when we first heard of the Florida boom. I had a thousand dollars saved, and he hadn't a cent. But he had grit, and he had judgment, and folks reckoned he was a smart man. So I thought I couldn't do better'n to let him play the hand while I planked down the dollars. That's where I made an everlastin' mistake. He was a mean skunk, a darned mean skunk!"

He paused and reflected, his vacant eyes wandering round the luxurious furniture of the room.

"Down here in these cursed pine woods our train

jumped the track, and every soul on board that passenger car was killed except just us two. I was kinder knocked out myself, and Ned Simmonds he lifted every dollar I owned and left me to feed buzzards. He was a mean skunk, was Ned Simmonds!

"I don't rightly know what happened after that, but next thing I remember I was away up north on a stock farm with old man Jessop and his daughter, the sweetest little girl that ever came out of Georgia."

A sunny childish smile flitted across the man's face, and for some moments he seemed in danger of losing the thread of his story. With a painful effort he began again.

"That girl had saved my life, and she only laughed when the doctors said I'd be crazy and crippled for the rest of my time. They couldn't make no sort of sense out of my talk; but the girl, she understood. So she persuaded her dad to carry me along when they moved north, and I've bin there ever since. Seems like ten years I've worked on that stock farm, and all the time I was a-studyin' and a-studyin' to tell them how I came to be on them cars. It all panned out at last, but it was mighty slow work. Then old Jessop put me on the track. He's some kind of a lawyer, I reckon, and pretty middlin' smart. The girl she helped most; but it was him as got the papers fixed up. Then I came South to get even with Ned Sim-

monds. But I quit at night so she wouldn't know. She'd never let me come alone."

He smiled and rubbed his hands in appreciation of his own cunning.

"Now I want ter find Ned Simmonds, see? Old man Jessop thinks likely he's changed his name and made his pile workin' the boom. He was a mean skunk, anyhow!"

At the conclusion of the strange recital Marks looked up. He had been engaged in paring his nails with a penknife as he listened, and a casual observer might have supposed him far more interested in the former than the latter occupation.

"There is one point I don't quite understand," he remarked. "If, as you say, every passenger on the cars was killed, what possible evidence could you adduce to substantiate your claim against this man—Simmonds—in case you found him?"

The cunning smile deepened on his hearer's face. Diving into his pocket, he produced a packet tied together with a piece of blue ribbon.

"The papers I spoke of a while back," he said quickly, fumbling nervously with the knot.

Marks held out his penknife, but the man shook his head. He untied the blue ribbon with some difficulty, folded it deliberately, and placed it in his breast-pocket.

"This one is an affidavit sworn to before a Notary

Public by two men who knew the contract me and Ned Simmonds fixed up when we left Philadelphia. That one is the sworn statement of the conductor who found me lyin' on the track where Ned Simmonds told him he'd left me. And here's the agreement that man's got to sign before we close our account. Old man Jessop fixed that up, and there ain't no bluffin' him. It says how he robbed me of my pile, and undertakes to pay me fifty cents of every dollar he has in the world my money brought him. When I've got that signed I'll go right back to Georgia, and the day we're married I'll hand them papers to my little gal for a weddin' present."

Again he paused, and looked eagerly, almost wistfully, into Marks's face.

The latter's gaze never faltered. He had gauged the strength of his adversary's hand without exposing his own.

"I think I *can* help you," he answered deliberately, noting each change in Mullin's face. "I remember Ned Simmonds perfectly,—indeed I have had dealings with him. I need scarcely say I had no suspicion that the money he invested so freely was not honestly his own. He speculated in land on a large scale, but with excellent judgment, and he must have made a pretty substantial fortune before he left. A year ago he went South to Cuba ; to take up a partnership in a tobacco factory, as I understood. He is probably there at this

moment and you should have no difficulty in tracing him, for I never heard that he had changed his name. Now, if I can be of any further assistance——”

The sentence remained unfinished. With a gesture incredibly swift in one of his appearance the other had sprung to his feet, and the lamplight gleamed along the barrel of a revolver as he pointed it full into the speaker's face. His expression had changed to one of furious insanity.

“You thievin' skunk,” he shouted, “you lyin' thievin' skunk! D'you think I didn't know you the first minute I saw your swindlin' face? I gave you your chance, and you've tried to bluff me out. Now sign that paper, or, by God, I'll scatter your brains across your own table!”

The Mayor of Orangeville was a man of resource and a bold one. With death staring him in the face and the wild maniac eyes glaring into his own his coolness never deserted him for an instant.

“I am alone in the house and unarmed,” he answered without a tremor in his voice; “and you can shoot me like a dog if you've a mind to and get clear away before a soul can come to my assistance. But I risked my life that night to save your's and I shall carry the scars to my grave. One word more! Remember that with my death your only chance of recovering one single dollar is gone for ever.”

The dazed look came back into the other's face and

his arm dropped to his side. The furious burst of passion had left him more helpless than before. Marks pursued his advantage.

"The night of that collision every man on the passenger car who had not been mercifully killed outright was roasted to death. But for me you would have shared their fate. I pulled you out, believing you to be dead, and I knew that you had about your person the money we had proposed to share in building up our fortune. I took it, I grant you; but I had a better right to it than anyone else. Do you suppose the train hands would have passed it over? Not they! They'd have robbed you first and left you to die afterwards. Lay down your pistol, man, and let us talk business."

The stronger will asserted itself. Mechanically the man obeyed, though distrust was in his eyes.

"Why did you lie to me a while back?" he asked.

"I only followed your lead. You chose to pretend you didn't recognise me, for reasons of your own. I chose to play the farce out, for mine. Come, let us talk sense. I invested your fortune, true; but I backed it up with my own energy and judgment. Not one man in a thousand could have built up this city from the material I had to work upon, and you know it. Well, I did it with your capital and I'm prepared to make you any restitution in reason. After all, it's only a question of terms."

"Here's my terms," answered Mullins, as he held out the written agreement. "You sign that and hand over the dollars. I'll quit on the up-train to-morrow morning."

"And marry the little girl from Georgia next day, eh?"

The man made no answer and Marks shifted his position slightly, leaning his head on his hand in apparent deep reflection. At last he spoke.

"Come," he said, "I agree; and you must confess you've got the best of the bargain. I've done all the work and you reap half the benefit. Well, it's the way of the world, I suppose. Give me the paper."

With a smile of almost childish delight Mullins came to his side and spread the document carefully before him. Marks read it over slowly aloud, following the written lines with the forefinger of his left hand.

And even as he read his right crept quietly, stealthily, along the table until it grasped the butt of the pistol his victim had laid aside. The next instant he sprang to his feet—armed.

Too late Mullins divined his purpose and, with the fury of a wild beast, sprang at his throat. There was a moment's frantic struggle before Marks's pistol arm drew clear, followed instantly by a sharp report. And even as the smoke cleared away the dying man raised himself upon his elbow; pressed a piece of faded blue

ribbon to his lips, and gasped out his life at his murderer's feet.

The mayor walked over to the window, threw it wide open and deliberately knocked a hole in the glass with the butt of the pistol. Then he gathered up the papers from the table and, dropping them one by one into the fire, stood and watched until the last grey ash had crumbled away.

"I couldn't afford to take the chances," he muttered. "It's more than a man's life is worth to trust such evidence as that in the hands of a lunatic and a little girl from Georgia!"

It was a thrilling story which greeted the little household on their return from the theatre an hour later, but nothing to the account of the affair which embellished the weekly columns of the *Orangeville Reporter*. That journal fairly revelled in the descriptive details of "the dastardly attack by an armed burglar upon our respected mayor," and devoted more than half a page of eulogy to his manifold perfections and the courage and promptitude he had displayed in summarily meting out justice to his cowardly assailant.

Still there are people who assert that honesty is the best policy and yet others who maintain that the ways of the evil-doer can never hope to prosper; and they are probably right.

But Silas G. Marks is a millionaire, just the same.

CHAPTER XV

DOWN SOUTH

"SIT tight! This is about the worst piece of road in the county."

The warning was given none too soon. Arthur Manners gripped the dash-board of the jolting waggon just in time to retain his seat as the wiry little ponies strained and struggled over a stretch of rotting "corduroy" road. Engineered after the primitive Florida fashion of laying a hundred yards of tree trunks side by side through a swampy hammock and filling in the crevices with wet sand; traffic, rain and the lapse of years had converted the whole into a slough which tested horse-flesh and waggon springs alike to their utmost.

"Now we've got five miles of sound going till we make the Devil's Creek," said Jim Scott, as he set his willing ponies into a fast trot again on the other side.

They rattled along in comparative silence, blowing clouds of smoke and scarcely exchanging a remark, after the custom of Englishmen who have got beyond the first formal stage of acquaintanceship.

It was a curious friendship which had arisen between

the pair, and Manners himself was sorely puzzled to account for the attraction which he felt for the only man whom he knew to be his rival. Probably it owed its origin to that love of sport and a good sportsman which is so strong a characteristic of our countrymen.

It was May Allison who had originated the present expedition, and a beautifully mounted buck's head which Jim had given her led up to the suggestion. The cowboy's eloquent description of the manner in which he had procured it had roused in his hearer the instinct which prompts Englishmen to "go out and kill something." Arthur Manners in his turn had grown eloquent on the subject of a memorable week which he had spent in a Highland deer-forest. Instantly both men realised that they had met on common ground.

"I'm afraid you'll find the Florida game pretty slow after the real thing," said Jim; "but there's a big buck lying up within a couple of miles of my place. If you care to come down there for a couple of nights, I can guarantee you a shot at him. It is an experience, if it isn't sport!"

The invitation had been accepted as frankly as it was given, and the details speedily arranged. There was a certain mystery attaching to the cowboy's Southern home which others besides Manners wished to penetrate.

The sandy road through the pine woods was but

little used and fairly hard going, and the driver did not spare his ponies. In less than half an hour they pulled up on the near bank of the Devil's Creek. It was a picturesque spot, and a pleasant contrast to the unbroken monotony of the dead level on either side.

The creek itself apparently had its source in a belt of hammock barely visible on the extreme right, and at the spot where it had been bridged over ran between two steep banks, which in that flat country formed a miniature ravine. In the clear water below, a shoal of fish could be seen darting into the shadows under the bank.

"Better get down and walk over," said Jim. "The bridge is about as rotten as it can hang together. When somebody falls through and breaks his neck, I expect they'll build a new one, certainly not before."

The advice seemed sound and Manners took it, though the cowboy himself never offered to leave his seat, walking the ponies carefully over the creaking timbers.

"Why don't you break it up?" asked Manners, as he climbed back into his place. "They'd have to build it again then."

"Such a deuce of a long way round," was the careless answer. "You see it's straight in my line, and so few people use this track that they would probably take months to put up a new one."

The remainder of the journey was not particularly

eventful, though it was obvious that the country into which they penetrated was far out of the beaten track of civilisation. In the heat of the day they rested for an hour under the grateful shade of a clump of scrub oak where Jim fed and watered his ponies while the two men consumed their lunch. About four o'clock in the afternoon they halted again at a little wooden shanty, the first they had passed for hours, and the owner, a wizened old man, hobbled out on a wooden leg in answer to the cowboy's hail.

"Want some birds?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," said Jim. "Are they fresh?"

"Guess so, I shot 'em half an hour since and they was mighty lively then."

He stumped back into the house and re-appeared with a couple of brace of quail.

"That's your dinner," said Jim, as he stowed them away under the waggon-seat and set his ponies going again.

"Who's the old sportsman?"

"My only neighbour, and the best shot in the South. You wouldn't think he's over sixty to look at him, would you? Before he lost his leg he was the most active man of his age I ever saw. He's bad to beat even now."

"How did he lose it?"

"The only authentic case I ever knew of recovery from a rattlesnake bite."

"By Jove! How did he treat it?"

"Originally, as he does most things. He was out alone, with his old muzzle-loader, when he trod on the rattler and it turned and bit him in the leg. He shot it first; then he gashed the place open with his knife, poured in a handful of gunpowder and set a match to it. He blew a hole in his leg that you could have put your fist into, but it probably saved his life, for he managed to crawl home and drink raw whisky until I chanced to find him. He says he swallowed the best part of a gallon! I can't vouch for that, but I know he hobbled through a long day's quail shooting with me four months after they'd cut off his leg and fitted him with a new one. Now we're close home. Doesn't look a promising site for a house, does it?"

Manners looked about him in surprise. They were heading straight for a dense growth of hammock land, thick, tangled, and apparently impenetrable. On the tough wire grass the track had dwindled away to nothing, but the driver never slacked his pace.

"Rum place to live," said Manners. "I shouldn't think you're troubled with visitors."

"No, that's the chief attraction. Sit tight."

As he spoke they had entered the hammock and turned at a sharp angle round the trunk of a gnarled old oak. In and out of the trees the cowboy steered his ponies at a steady trot with the same ease as though he were driving along a well-kept high

road. But there was barely a foot to spare on either hand.

"Bad place to find on a dark night," said Jim. "Those are wild orange trees on your right; not many left in the country now."

"Why, this is as bad as the maze at Hampton Court," said Manners, looking round him as they dived into the heart of the thicket. It was almost dark under the shadow of the thick foliage overhead. "How the deuce do you find your way?"

"Can't miss it," was the reply. "A waggon couldn't get through anywhere else. Now we take to the water. This is what the Indians call a blind trail."

In front of them a shallow creek rippled along from left to right. Jim turned his ponies into it and followed its course for about fifty yards, emerging on the further bank. Manners noted that the dense growth was growing less impenetrable, and presently they emerged into an open space.

"There's the shanty," said his companion, as he pulled up.

It was a strangely picturesque scene on which they gazed.

Beneath them lay one of those deep natural hollows which here and there relieve the blank unpicturesqueness of the country, culminating in a deep clear water lake about half a mile in length and half as broad. On every side except the spot where they had halted,

a dense forest of timber clothed the steep banks with a jungle growth, terminating in huge cypress trees which fringed the water's edge with their weird drapery of Spanish moss. But for the large natural clearing in which they found themselves, the place represented that grandeur of utter solitude which redeems the outlying portions of Florida's scenery from the charge of sandy ugliness.

But here art had joined hands with nature to form that necessary contrast which adds so subtle a charm to an unexpected picture. A miniature settlement consisting of stabling, kennels, and outbuildings; an enclosed paddock in which herds of cattle and ponies cropped the rich grass; and lastly, a curiously picturesque bungalow imparted an element of bustle and life to the contrasted silence of the impenetrable forest growth which made a very vivid impression on the visitor.

"By Jove, this is worth coming a long way to see," said Manners.

The cowboy smiled without answering, though the genuineness of the other's enthusiasm evidently pleased him. He gathered up his reins, and the willing ponies trotted briskly stablewards, skirting the well-kept paddock fence. As they passed the kennels their arrival was heralded by the deep bay of a couple of Southern hounds, huge black and tan brutes of the Spanish bloodhound breed, and immediately from the

stables there emerged a figure in shirt sleeves whom Manners recognised as the taciturn negro to whose care Chipmonk had been entrusted at the Orangeville gymkhana. He met them at the door of the bungalow and took the reins from the cowboy without a word.

His master gave him a few instructions and he drove off in the direction of the stables.

"Now come and have a look round," said the cowboy, and Manners followed him through the French windows which opened on to the wide verandah. It was a quaint little house, whose rambling shape gave evidence of alterations and additions to the original plan, but it differed very pleasantly from the customary 'square-built cottage which seems to have so universal an attraction for Florida architects and settlers.

There was no attempt at elaborateness, the rooms being all finished with walls of varnished pine, but their size and coolness was a pleasant contrast to the many shanties which Manners had grown accustomed to. Everywhere the walls were covered with deers' heads and antlers, while the floors were strewn with skins of deer, bear, wild cat, racoon and opossum. It was an ideal bachelor's abode.

"This is my own den," said Jim, leading the way into a room rather larger than the rest, whose bay windows commanded a view of the lake across the broad verandah. It was furnished as unpretentiously

as the rest, but it gave ample evidence of its owner's catholic tastes.

One of the walls was given over to a collection of guns, pistols, rifles and fishing-rods; a cottage piano and a banjo occupied one of the corners, and a book-case filled with well-worn volumes another. There was an imposing array of riding and driving whips in the space between the windows, and everywhere a profusion of stuffed birds and heads of every variety. An enormous alligator did duty as a stick-rack, while a little black bear on his hind legs supported an oil lamp.

"Gave me no end of trouble, that little chap!" remarked the cowboy, as Manners stooped to examine it. "I lay out six nights running before he gave me a fair chance, and I shot him by moonlight in a patch of palmetto scrub about a mile from the house. I was afraid of spoiling his skin as a specimen, and I hadn't learned as much about stuffing them as I know now."

"Do you mean to say you stuffed all these animals yourself?"

"Oh yes, and spoiled as many more before I got the knack of it. It's a fascinating amusement when you catch the idea, but like most things it requires a lot of practice if you want to do it well. Come and have a look at the stables before dinner."

Manners spent a very interesting half-hour in the inspection of stables, kennels, paddock and poultry-

yard, and that which he saw made a very vivid impression on him. Everything gave evidence of a thoroughly practical mind, and without the slightest attempt at show,—everything was kept and managed with wonderful neatness and method. His admiration for his host increased every moment. There was something singularly fascinating about this ideal little homestead buried away by itself miles out of the beaten tracks of men, and it ceased to be a mystery to him that the cowboy should delight in retiring to this unsuspected retreat for months at a time, devoting himself to the breeding of his cattle and ponies, and living on the produce of his gun and rod.

The dinner to which they sat down at twilight was in keeping with the rest, plainly served but excellent of its kind. A clear soup, a fish freshly caught from the lake, a brace of quail and a haunch of Florida venison formed a pleasant and grateful contrast to the tough monotony of Southern hotel fare or the culinary experiments of the resourceless settler. Coffee and cigarettes on the verandah, and pipes and piquet in the cowboy's den passed the evening so quickly that Manners was startled to find that it was close on midnight when they had completed their last game.

But the novelty of his surroundings had made so deep an impression upon him that he lay awake late that night. The cowboy's personality had strangely affected him, and for the first time he began to realise

that there are other occupations open to men of action in Southern climes than the doubtful cultivation of the orange.

Puzzling out the problems which presented themselves to his mind, Manners finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WILD CAT HAMMOCK

HE awoke early next morning with the dim consciousness of being in new quarters, and a natural instinct drew him to the window.

Day was just breaking and a heavy mist hung over the lake, but in the uncertain light he made out a mounted figure riding into the thicket on the further shore. It was Jim Scott, with a cigarette in his mouth and a telescope slung across his shoulder.

Manners looked at his watch. It was barely half-past four.

"What an energetic chap," he reflected, as he turned into bed again. "Where the deuce is he off to now?"

He found out at breakfast time, for whilst they discussed that excellent meal, waited upon by the taciturn Jake, he learned that his host had been out to "harbour" their quarry much in the manner still in vogue in the West country.

"I thought it best to look them up at dawn," Jim remarked, "in case they should have shifted their quarters. There are two bucks, a big one and a smaller beast, and I saw them feeding along the

north side of Wild Cat Hammock, which is about four miles off. I waited until they turned in when the sun came out, and they'll lie up now till we're ready for them. Anyhow, you're certain of a shot."

Half an hour later everything was in readiness for a start, and they made their way to the stable, Manners armed with a twelve-bore breechloader and a dozen buck-shot cartridges; his host with a light single-barrelled rifle.

"I might get a snapshot at the little chap at long range if you don't stop them both," he remarked; and there was something very infectious in his confidence.

A couple of ponies stood ready saddled, and in the background the silent Jake appeared in yet another character with a brace of Southern hounds straining on a leash.

Jim led the way at a steady trot, the negro running easily in his wake with a dogged swing which denoted the strain of Indian blood in his veins. Skirting the lake, they threaded a corner of the opposite hammock, emerging into the open pine woods beyond. After covering the best part of a mile, Jim suddenly pulled up his pony.

"There's a covey of quail feeding in that clump of live oak," he said. "Would you like to see them come up to call?"

"Very much indeed," was the sceptical reply.

Jim smiled. "If you'll get under cover of that patch of palmetto and keep quite still, you shall," he answered.

He whistled the call of a cock quail two or three times in succession softly and very clearly. The imitation was perfect.

From the neighbourhood of the live oak came back a faint answer. Jim whistled again, and shortly the sound was repeated close at hand. Once more, and on the still air came a tiny rustling sound, while five or six little striped heads bobbed up from the grass almost at his feet. Manners' pony moved, worried by a too persistent horse-fly, and with a whirr of wings the birds rose and disappeared.

"It's an easy trick enough," laughed the cowboy, as they trotted on, "but I knew you didn't believe me, and I wanted to establish your confidence before we came to serious business."

The negro showed his teeth, and Manners made no reply. He felt just a little ashamed of himself.

Three miles further on Jim dismounted on the outskirts of a thick growth of heavily timbered low-lying land.

"This is Wild Cat Hammock," he said, "and we must leave the ponies behind. We lay the hounds on here, and they'll drive the deer out through the pass where we shall wait. They'll come pretty fast, for they lie close till the hounds are almost on them, and they'll

head straight for the open country. They must pass within thirty yards of where we stand, and the small buck will probably lead. Let him go! The other won't be far behind."

He gave over the ponies to the negro, who disappeared with his charges behind a thick growth of scrub, and proceeded to uncouple the hounds.

For a few moments the animals quested hither and thither in silence, their noses to the ground. Suddenly, and almost simultaneously, they struck the scent, and giving tongue in response to their master's cheer, laid themselves down to their work while the woods re-echoed to their deep-toned music.

"Come along," said Jim, as the hounds tore away on a burning scent. "We haven't much time to spare."

He turned and headed for a corner of the hammock exactly in the opposite direction, and Manners, marvelling, followed without a word.

Three hundred yards further on they turned into the outskirts of the hammock, to emerge again a quarter of a mile higher up, where the cowboy indicated an opening in the thick undergrowth as the "pass" which led from the thicket of cypress and live oak into the open country beyond.

"They'll be here in five minutes," he announced, after listening for a moment to the faint bay of his hounds in the distance.

He loaded and cocked his rifle, and lay down with

his arms resting on the trunk of a fallen oak tree, facing towards the open.

Then they waited in silence, while the music of the hounds rose and fell on the breathless air, until suddenly there came a crash through the brushwood, and the splash of water on their left. Manners felt his heart beat high with suppressed excitement, whilst his hands shook and trembled with a sudden access of "stag-fever."

"They're crossing the creek," whispered his companion. "Keep cool."

But the advice was thrown away. At the same moment the deer broke covert at a terrific pace; the smaller buck leading, as Jim had foretold, and the other, a magnificent animal with widely branching antlers, following in his wake. They passed at a gallop within twenty yards of the unsuspected danger, and almost simultaneously Manners let drive with both barrels. Crash went the heavy charge of buckshot into the undergrowth beyond, as the deer sped on unscathed.

"Behind him," muttered Jim, as he drew a bead on the leader. "I wonder if they'll stand for a second on that sand-hill."

Even as he spoke they paused, dazed by the echoes of the shot, and apparently uncertain as to whence it had come, with their noses up wind, and their long ears twitching nervously. In that brief space of time came

the sharp crack of the rifle, and the smaller buck leaped high into the air, to roll over a dozen yards beyond with a bullet through his brain. The other gave one affrighted glance at his fallen companion, laid his ears flat to his head, and sped away into the open like an arrow.

Then Manners blew the smoke from the barrels of his gun with a most excusable expletive.

"The best chance I ever had in my life," he groaned, "and I never touched a hair. Why the devil didn't you kill him instead of the little one?"

Jim laughed.

"Because he's coming back to give you another chance. Help me to get this little beast's carcass out of the way before the hounds come up. Then I'll explain."

Ten minutes later, with the assistance of Jake, who had apparently dropped from the skies at the sound of the shots, the "little beast" was slung across one of the ponies; and almost at the same moment the hounds came up at full cry on the trail. They hung for a minute or two about the dead deer, until Jim lifted them once more on to the fresh scent, when they speedily disappeared in pursuit.

"Now you'll see the odd part of a Florida deerhunt. They'll run that beggar out into the open, and keep him moving in a circle for the next two hours. At the end of that time he'll make straight back for the

place he started from, and he'll come in up wind from the further end. We shall be there to meet him. Jump on the pony and I'll walk alongside; I can make better time over this kind of ground than you could."

But this time Manners' incredulity got the better of his resolve. His failure had annoyed him.

"How the deuce can you tell what the deer's going to do? I don't see why he should come back to a place where he's just been shot at, and what's more, I don't believe he will."

It was by no means a courteous remark, and there flitted across the cowboy's face the little cynical smile which occasionally disfigured it.

"Come and see," he answered quietly, and walked alongside the pony for some minutes in silence.

"I haven't studied Florida wood-craft for the last five years for nothing," he said presently. "That is quite long enough to teach you what a hunted deer is likely to do and—many other things. Those two beasts have made this covert their headquarters for six months, and neither of them would leave it now unless he were obliged to. I've only disturbed them once, and then I didn't shoot because they were out of season. Therefore, as long as that buck is kept on the move he will inevitably make his way back, and a hunted deer always comes into covert up wind. This hammock runs out to a spur at the far end, and

there's only one pass they use there ; you can tell that by the tracks. We are going to wait there, and in about a couple of hours our buck will be back again. By that time the hounds will be miles behind him and he won't be in any hurry. Nor will you, for you've had a shot and got over your nervousness. So this time you will probably kill him."

He spoke very deliberately, as you address a child which is unable to grasp a rudimentary lesson, and his manner impressed his hearer very considerably.

It was a long *détour* which they were compelled to make before reaching their destination, and after the negro had again hidden himself and his ponies from observation, Manners was glad to take up his position under the grateful shade of a huge oak fantastically draped with grey streamers of Spanish moss. Jim Scott laid himself down at full length on the dry grass and lighted a cigarette.

Manners watched him for some moments in silence while another problem presented itself to his mind. He was fighting with an irresistible desire to find a flaw in his companion's wood-craft, though for the life of him he couldn't understand why. Many good-natured men in moments of annoyance find much consolation in proving somebody else to be mistaken in his deductions. The process has an inexplicably soothing fascination, and nothing is more calculated to foster it than a sojourn at an early age amongst a very

self-assertive nation. Manners brought his arguments to a focus, though his remark was more respectful than before.

"I'm afraid you'll think me awfully sceptical," he said, "but I want to learn. If the buck comes in here from the open as you expect, he must inevitably get our wind before he is within shot. Why won't he turn back?"

"Ah! That's a question that has often puzzled me. He must get our wind, as you say; and yet it won't stop him. Perhaps for the same reason that a roe-deer in the Highland birch woods will sometimes lie so close that the beaters almost touch him as they pass, before he breaks back behind the line. I fancy their instinct must tell them that in such thick covert as this a couple of bounds in any direction will put them out of danger."

He lay back, musing for a moment in silence; then continued.

"If you study the habits of Florida game you will come across some very curious problems. I don't profess to explain them. I can't tell you, for instance, why a rabbit in this country is never known to burrow for himself; but he will go to ground in a gopher hole if he is hard pressed. I can't tell you why an alligator will attack a nigger in the water and leave a white man alone. I can't tell you why the egrets, which are as timid as any bird that flies, will nest year after year in

the same place where they are shot down in hundreds by the brutes who kill them for their plumes. I don't know why the doves will go to water in the same spot and roost in the same belt of trees for six months, and then suddenly leave the place for ever. And I can't tell you why a racoon will sooner starve than hunt for his food where the moonlight throws his shadow on the ground, or why a black bass won't touch a bait when the moon's at the full. All these things I know for facts, but I can no more give you a reason for them than I can explain why that little devil sits and chatters above our heads, and why no deer in the country will come within a mile of us unless we silence him."

Manners looked up. On an overhanging branch a blue jay fluttered restlessly to and fro, screaming and jabbering incessantly.

Jim Scott rolled over on his side and took a pistol from his pocket, threw up his hand quickly, and pressed the trigger. In the middle of his noisy story the bird closed his wings and fell to the ground like a stone.

"That's a neat shot! I couldn't have hit him with a pistol in a dozen tries. How do you manage it?"

"Chiefly practice; but there's a knack in it I learned from a cracker who was the best pistol shot I ever saw. Poor devil, he tried it once too often. A sheriff's *posse* was scouring the country for him when

I ran across him in the hammock. He devilish nearly shot me."

"What did they want him for?"

"Murder, they called it."

"The deuce they did! Not a nice chap to meet alone. Who'd he killed?"

"His wife—and a man!"

"Ah! Did they catch him?"

"No. I put them on the wrong track."

"Why?"

"Because I'd heard his story and I sympathised with him."

"H'm! Then you became an accessory after the fact."

"I suppose I did, but I'm afraid I don't much mind. Look here, the man was an uneducated cracker, who trusted his wife, and she deceived him. He resorted to the only argument he understood and thereby ridded the world of an unprincipled scoundrel and a worthless woman. In a civilised country he would probably have taken his case into the Divorce Court and sold his dishonour in public at a jury's valuation. In which case I shouldn't have sympathised with him in the least. And after all, it's only a matter of——"

He broke off suddenly, shading his eyes with his hand and peering into the open.

"Here's your buck coming back. He's been quicker than I expected. Are you ready?"

Manners opened his gun breech and displayed two loaded cartridges. Then he strained his eyes in vain for a glimpse of his quarry.

"He's just crossed the far ridge where that stunted pine tree stands, and he'll keep in the hollow now till he's almost within shot. When you see him again he'll be on the alert and ready to dash into covert at the slightest alarm. Get your gun up and cover the patch of palmetto where the black shadow lies; he'll pass close to it."

A few minutes later the buck appeared in full view, his nostrils expanded, sniffing cautiously at the tainted air; and pausing ever and anon to listen for the pursuit he had far outdistanced. Slowly he approached, standing at last uncertain, close to the shadow of the palmetto.

"Now," whispered the cowboy. "Both barrels." Bang! bang! came the shots, waking the echoes on every side and sending a couple of blue jays screaming into the thickest of the covert. The big buck sprang into the air, staggered, and dropped upon his knees. A moment he struggled to regain his feet, then turned his great piteous eyes in the direction of the report, and died.

"A splendid head," said the cowboy, as he rolled back his sleeves to the elbow and plunged his hunting knife into the animal's throat. "You must let me set it up for you."

* * * * *

On the deck of a river steam-boat, Manners stood next day by the captain's side, watching a pair of wiry ponies speeding south on their homeward journey.

"Reckon that's Jim Scott," said the skipper. "And a mighty spry team," he added.

"They are; they've just brought me twenty miles and they look as fresh as when they started. Do you know him?"

"Wal, I know he's an Englishman, and a mighty crazy one at that. Lives by himself on a darned sand-hill twenty miles from the nearest store. But he's reckoned to be the smartest shot in South Florida and he breeds the best ponies in the State."

He turned a quid of tobacco in his mouth and spat pensively into the river.

"Guess that man's left a history behind him somewhere," he added sententiously. "And I reckon there was a woman in it."

"Ah, no, I hope not," answered Manners earnestly.

And the next moment he wondered what on earth had made him say it.

CHAPTER XVII

MARKS SHOWS HIS HAND

"MAY," said John Allison, "I want to talk to you if you can spare five minutes."

"All right, dear, but you mustn't be long. I'm making a rabbit curry for luncheon and it's going to be a beauty."

The girl stood in the doorway of the little room which her father had appropriated for his work, and watched him as he bent over the negative which he was engaged in retouching. In her pretty white dress she looked singularly young and graceful, and her father suddenly realised the delicacy of the explanation which lay before him. Manlike, he would have postponed it if he could, but there was no loophole of escape. She noted the nervousness he could not conceal, and went over to his side.

"You are worried about something, dear. What is it?" she asked.

His carefully prepared opening suddenly deserted him.

"Something very serious," he answered lamely, and paused.

"Is it money?" asked the girl quickly.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say it is," he answered.

The smile died out from her face, and she sighed.

"Tell me all about it. Are we very poor?"

"I haven't got twenty pounds in the world, and what's worse, I don't see where I am to get any more from."

He kept his gaze fixed on the negative, though he felt that her eyes were seeking his own, and he fumbled uselessly with his pencil.

"If it is as bad as that," she said presently, "I suppose we shall have to sell the grove."

"That is just what we can't do."

"Can't do," she echoed. "Why not?"

"Because I've borrowed money on it," he answered desperately. "Because its mortgaged for two thousand dollars, and unless the money is paid within a week from to-day we shall be homeless as well as penniless."

The girl stood quite motionless and her face turned white to the very lips. There was a break in her voice when she spoke again.

"Don't you think you might have told me before? When did you borrow the money?"

"Last winter, after the frost," he answered, ignoring the first question. "I was obliged to do it."

"Yes, but you needn't have kept it from me all this time. Who—who lent it you?"

He looked up and faced her.

"Silas Marks," he answered slowly.

"Ah," said the girl, "I hadn't thought of him." Her tone was so obviously one of relief that John Allison, misunderstanding it, gathered courage.

"He's been a very good friend to me, May. Indeed, I don't know what I should have done without him. But for his help we should have lost the place long ago."

"Wouldn't it have been better if we had?" she answered. "At least you could have got a fair price for it instead of putting yourself in the power of a man like Marks."

John Allison felt that things were going from bad to worse. He made a desperate attempt to save the situation.

"I know I ought to have consulted you before," he said, "but I didn't want to worry you about business matters, and I always hoped that the trees might come round again in time to pay off the mortgage. Even now it is not too late. If you will help me, we can tide over this difficulty still."

"Of course I will help you," she answered quickly. "But what can I do? I can't appeal to Marks."

"Not exactly that, but you can do even more."

He paused and stole a glance at his daughter's face, but it was evident that no hint of his meaning had reached her. She waited for his next words in evident bewilderment.

He was face to face with his dilemma now, and racked his brains for the sentences which had come to him so glibly when alone. But it was too late, he felt that the subject had been approached from the wrong standpoint.

"May," he said slowly, "you know that Mr Marks has been a very constant visitor here, and you have naturally been thrown a good deal into one another's society. He has taken a great interest in you, a very great interest. It was only natural that he should."

He paused again and his restless fingers toyed nervously with his pencil, but he did not dare to look up. Into the girl's eyes had come a sudden troubled look as the first faint suspicion of his meaning reached her. Then the hot blood rushed to her face, crimsoning it from throat to brow. It died away again, leaving her quite white; but she spoke no word.

Her silence embarrassed him, but he resumed doggedly.

"That interest has ripened—on his side at least—into something more than friendship. He has spoken to me of it more than once,—in fact he has asked my consent to make you his wife."

He brought it out with difficulty, but with a certain sense of relief. He felt that the worst was over. In a silence which appeared to him interminable he ventured at last to meet his daughter's eyes. Her face was white and set, and her voice almost beyond

her control. Indeed, she could barely trust herself to speak.

"What did you say to him?"

The words were almost inaudible and he felt that she was merely striving to gain time to recover herself.

He tried to assume a pleasant paternal tone, though he knew that it was a hopeless failure.

"I told him that I would talk it over with you," he said. "I explained to him that it would naturally come as a surprise to you, and that you must have time to think it over. Of course I don't wish in any way to influence you or to hurry you in your decision. But you know that Marks is a very rich man and your position as his wife would be a very good one."

She interrupted him with heaving breast and flashing eyes, with a sudden spirit which he had never even suspected to lurk beneath her gentle manner. All the pride of outraged womanhood, of trust betrayed, came to her rescue; and the words burst forth now with a suddenness which took away his breath.

"You let him believe that I would listen to him, that I might consent to a proposal which is nothing but an insult. Yes, an insult! You let him think that I might be bargained for, bought and sold for—two thousand dollars! What right had you to do it,—how dared you do it?"

John Allison was rather frightened. He had not expected an outburst such as this.

"My dear," he began timidly, "you forget——"

"I forget nothing! I only know that I have been insulted, that the only person in the world on whom I thought I could depend has made me the subject of a bargain with a swindling land agent! Yes, that is what he is, this man you call your friend. He has traded on your poverty and your credulity, and wormed himself into your confidence for his own purpose. He has flattered you, cringed to you, and forced himself into your house under false pretences. Then he lent you money and got you into his power; and you never saw it or suspected it. And I was to be the price! I was to be his wife! I loathe him, do you hear,—I detest the very sight of him, and you can tell him that I said so. You can tell him that, sooner than marry him,—sooner than even see him or speak to him again,—I would go and throw myself into that lake."

With a sudden gesture she pointed out towards the water; and turning from him with flashing eyes and quivering mouth, she swept from the room.

For a moment or two John Allison sat alone in motionless bewilderment, staring at the open door. Then his gaze wandered round the empty room and finally lighted upon the negative which lay before him. Mechanically he bent over it and shaded in a doubtful outline.

With head erect and glittering tearless eyes the girl crossed the verandah and passed out into the open. The hot sun streamed down upon her uncovered head, but she never heeded it. She was conscious only of a sudden desire to be out in the fresh air and alone. Instinctively she turned into the well-known winding path that led downwards to the water's edge. She had almost reached the bank when she turned abruptly aside, threw herself down at full length in the long grass, and burying her face in her hands, sobbed as though her heart would break.

In the first reaction from the passionate anger which had swayed her, the feeling most prominent in her mind was one of shame, hot burning shame. That the man whom she had always instinctively distrusted and disliked should have dared to bargain for her purchase was an insult unparalleled in her experience. But that her father should have entered into the conspiracy against her, should have treated her as a mere chattel whose sale might relieve him from a temporary pecuniary embarrassment, filled her with a horror unspeakable.

An awful feeling of desolate loneliness swept over her, that feeling before which at times strong men have felt their boasted cynicism of little avail. On an overwrought, impulsive girl, the terrible results of one such moment leave their life-long trace.

Then, as the first burst of passion spent itself, came

a wild longing for companionship, for some one, any one to talk to. Ten minutes earlier, her only desire had been for solitude; now, as her mood changed, it seemed to be the one thing she dreaded.

Suddenly came the curious dream-like sensation of having been through this self-same scene once before. Somewhere, sometime, she had lain sobbing on the long grass, waiting for—what?

Quickly she raised her head with a curious catching of her breath. Before she looked she had known instinctively what she should see.

Cantering over the short turf, straight towards the spot where she lay half-hidden, there came a well-known rider on a wiry grey pony, humming a little tune in time to the swing of the hoof-beats.

Heading towards the stable, the white-clad figure caught his quick eye and he changed his direction, pulling up at the whitewashed fence which lay between them. With a little cheery wave of his broad-brimmed hat he greeted her, but she made no answer and gave no sign. He dismounted leisurely, made fast his pony's rein to one of the posts, and strode over the thick grass to her side. He started slightly when she raised her tear-stained face.

"What has happened, little girl?" he asked.

"Don't, Jim! don't speak to me. I want to be alone."

Her voice quivered and broke, and once more she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Presently she looked up and saw him standing gravely by her side. An unreasoning impulse suddenly swayed her.

"I wish you would go away," she said petulantly. "Don't you hear? I want to be alone."

He walked about ten yards and seated himself deliberately on the trunk of a lightwood tree, took a case from his pocket and carefully lighted a cigarette. But he asked no question, wisely waiting until her passionate mood should wear itself out.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Did you know that an English girl could be bought and sold like a slave in the market?"

"I believe it is often done," he answered gravely. "But not without the girl's consent."

The faint tinge of cynicism in his tone had its immediate effect. Instantly her whole manner softened and changed.

"Oh, Jim," she sobbed. "I'm so miserable."

He threw away his cigarette, and spoke as one soothes a little child.

"Poor little girl," he said. "Come and tell me all about it."

She crept over to his side and nestled down beside him, while he stroked her soft brown hair with a light and gentle touch. A strange soothed sense of relief came to her. There was a curious magnetism in the

strong, imperturbable self-reliance of this man whom she knew that she could trust.

It is a rare gift, and a priceless one, that strange power which is sometimes given to a strong nature of dominating the weaker will, of inspiring a confidence which it feels is not misplaced. And this gift Jim Scott possessed in an unusual degree. In the darkest hour of her young life the girl felt that the man she loved was a very tower of strength on which to lean.

In silence he listened while she told her story, though his brows contracted and the lines about his mouth set in grim determination.

"So it comes to this, Jim," she ended: "we are paupers unless I sell myself for two thousand dollars. I wonder if I'm worth it."

For a moment he did not answer, but sat tapping his riding boot with his stick, while his busy brain faced the problem. None but himself could fathom the depths of his temptation.

And yet when he spoke his voice betrayed no sign of his inward struggle; his manner was as cool and matter-of-fact as was his wont. Indeed, his answer vaguely disappointed her.

"I knew that Marks was a knave," he said, "but I hadn't realised that your father was a fool! It's a difficult combination to tackle."

He relapsed into silence, and the tears started to the girl's eyes.

"But what am I to do, Jim?" she asked piteously.
"What can I do?"

He bent over her, and a sudden hungry look came into his eyes. But he checked the obvious impulse to speak, and it seemed to the girl that his face had curiously aged and hardened when the words came.

"There is only one thing to be done," he answered grimly. "We've got to pay Marks two thousand dollars before this day week, and—settle his account."

"But we can't! Father has not got twenty pounds in the world. He told me so this morning."

"I'm afraid I wasn't thinking of your father. But in any case I daresay he would rather be in my debt than in Marks's."

The girl looked up quickly.

"Do you mean that you will pay the money?" she asked.

"Yes, I mean that I shall pay the money?" he answered.

"Oh, Jim," she said, "I did not mean to ask that. I ought not to have told you. I shouldn't have told you if I had guessed——"

"That I should help you? Why not?"

"Because I am ashamed to be always troubling you, —you have done so much for me already."

He rose slowly to his feet and turned in the direction of his pony. For a moment he looked straight into

her eyes, and once more she noticed the aged look which had crept into his face.

"Some day," he answered earnestly, "I shall ask you for payment in full."

A moment later the girl stood alone, listening to the rapid hoof-beats of the galloping pony. And though her eyes were full of unshed tears, she was conscious only of that wild, unreasoning thrill of happiness that comes but once in every woman's life.

CHAPTER XVIII

LUCKY AT CARDS

IN the foreground of his lonely homestead, Uncle Billy sat upon a pine stump, pensively sucking at the remnant of a well-blackened clay pipe. His shirt was abnormally dirty and his temper of the worst. A vicious mosquito alighted upon his unshaven chin. He slew it with a savage blow of his enormous hand, and buried it with his heel in the moist sand. His vacant eye rested for a moment upon the gorgeous colouring of a Florida sunset, and he solemnly cursed it for shining in his eyes.

The solitude was of his own making, and it annoyed him in that it left no opportunity of vilifying his fellow-men. Earlier in the afternoon he had apostrophised a tithe of the male population of Maryville who had ventured to visit him, and succeeded in making himself so extremely unpleasant that one of their number, a comparative stranger, had threatened reprisals with a revolver. But his companions had pacified and led him away, partly because they had learned to tolerate Uncle Billy, and partly because they wished to play poker; and the comparative stranger, who rejoiced in

the *sobriquet* of "Plug" Wilson, was known by reputation as a very doughty opponent. In the practice of his vocation he had fostered the habit of self-restraint until it had grown to be his second nature, and he was far too shrewd a man to place himself under the power of the law. For Plug Wilson was a professional gambler.

In the Southern States the type is well-nigh extinct, for the scope of operations has become so narrowed as to render the calling a precarious one, and its professors find that the game is scarcely worth the candle. Gradually they have drifted northwards, where the larger cities afford a wider and more lucrative field for their prowess, and they recuperate in the smoking saloons of Atlantic liners.

Plug Wilson was an excellent specimen of the genus; a slim, well-built man of doubtful age, with that peculiarly piercing eye rarely seen except in America, and a resolute face which absolutely refused to betray the slightest hint of that which passed within its owner's mind. He was a man who had bought his experience, and brought to bear upon his vocation an energy which must have insured his success in almost any walk in life. In all the wide world the one absorbing theme to him was the game of poker, and he viewed human nature solely and entirely by the shaded light of the card-table. His taper fingers were obviously fashioned for the purpose of shuffling and dealing

cards, and he might have made a tolerable living as a professor of the subtleties of sleight of hand. His keen eye was trained to note the slightest hesitation in discarding, which may throw a light upon an opponent's subsequent tactics, and his one object in life was that of fleecing his fellow-men for a livelihood. Utterly without scruple, his whole soul was in the game, and he would even play it fairly sooner than not play at all.

Such was the worthy who had caught the rough side of Uncle Billy's tongue, and whose abrupt and peaceful departure had roused that irascible old gentleman's anger.

"Got no more grit than a durned sand-fly," he grunted, as he rose and adjourned supper-wards.

Suddenly there smote upon his ear a sound which caused him to halt and listen attentively. Away in the distance a man's melodious voice was singing the refrain of the Suwanee River, and as he heard it there came for the fraction of a second a different light into the old man's bleary eyes.

"That's Jim Scott," he muttered; and, turning his back in the direction of the sound, lounged with affected carelessness towards his mansion.

A moment later the song ceased, and the same voice hailed him.

"Oh, Uncle Billy," it called, after the manner of the

Southern States. The old man vouchsafed no notice beyond an unseen grin.

"Hi, old man, are you deaf?"

This time the hail came in a stentorian shout which made even Uncle Billy jump. He turned round.

"No, but I should be durned soon if you was around long," he answered. "What d'you want anyhow?"

"Supper, in the first place," said the cowboy. "What have you got?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then you'll have to go and get something. I'm as hungry as a horse."

"Best go to the hotel," growled Uncle Billy.

Jim Scott paused in the act of dismounting. "I chink I will," he answered, and made as though to turn his reluctant pony towards the gate.

But Uncle Billy laid his hand quickly on the bridle.

"Hold on," he said. "Don't be in such an all-fired hurry. Reckon there's enough for us two!"

The cowboy's eye twinkled, but he made no comment; and Uncle Billy, grunting, disappeared into the house, whilst Jim stabled and fed his tired pony. They had done a long journey, and done it at their usual pace.

When he returned he found the old man busy in the kitchen, and between the two a miscellaneous supper was shortly ready for consumption. It consisted of

steak, bacon, hominy, eggs, and buckwheat cakes, flanked by an enormous coffee-pot. The pair fell to in silence.

Uncle Billy was the first to speak, with his mouth full of bacon. He was afraid that he had been unduly hospitable, and accordingly assumed his gruffest tone.

"What's brought you up here, anyhow?" he enquired courteously. "You ain't bin around for six months."

"No, and I shouldn't have come to-day if I hadn't been obliged to. I want money; will you lend me some?"

"What for?"

"That's my business. I'll pay it back within a month."

"H'm. Why don't you go to the bank?"

"I should have if Tom Luxmoore hadn't been away in England. As he was, I thought you would do as well."

"How much d'you want?"

"I have got to find two thousand dollars by the day after to-morrow. A thousand of it I have raised myself, but it took me three or four days to realise, and I've no time to waste. Will you lend me the other thousand?"

"No, I won't!" Uncle Billy snapped out the words with evident gusto.

The cowboy finished his meal with a copious draught of coffee and lighted a cigarette.

"All right," he said carelessly; "then I'll have to move on as soon as the pony's rested. Thanks for the supper, I've rather enjoyed it."

He tilted up his chair and placed his feet against the chimney-piece, apparently engrossed in the occupation of blowing smoke rings of assorted sizes. Uncle Billy watched the operation with a grin for several minutes. Then the force of example infected him, and he unearthed from the recesses of his waistcoat pocket the stump of a clay pipe and a paper packet of coarse dusty tobacco. He filled the bowl and packed it tightly with a dirty thumb, whereafter he smoked in silence, contemplating his companion's face the while, and revolving weighty matters in his mind.

"I'll loan you five hundred," he announced abruptly.

The cowboy looked round. "I'm afraid it's not enough," he answered.

"It's all I can lay hands on right now. Best take what you can git."

"Thanks, I will. But it leaves me still five hundred short. Anyone in Maryville got any money?"

The old man grinned a hideous grin. "Yes, there's one man," he said, "but I don't know as you'd get it off him!"

"Who's that?"

"Plug Wilson. He's playin' poker round to Macey's."

Jim Scott reflected for a moment.

"I think I'll join Plug Wilson's poker party," he remarked pensively.

"Then I won't loan you a durned cent."

The cowboy laughed. "You're a cantankerous old devil," he said. "What can it matter to you where the money goes so long as you get it back?"

"Plug Wilson's a sharp," was the irrelevant answer. "I've got no use for him."

"No, but I have. Lend me the money, old man, and make me up a bed. I'll stay here to-night."

His host grunted, wavered, and finally acquiesced, disappearing into an inner chamber and carefully shutting the door, much to the cowboy's amusement. He returned with a bundle of notes which he laid upon the table.

"You'd best count it," he said. Jim did so twice over.

"I make it six hundred," he remarked.

Uncle Billy grinned. "So do I," he answered. "You'll only need to win four!"

"Thank you, old man. You shall have it back within the month. Good-night. I'm off to Macey's."

His host accompanied him to the gate and stood there pensively smoking long after he had disappeared from view.

"Guess he'll about clean out Plug Wilson," he remarked as he returned to his domicile.

And Jim Scott made his way leisurely into the little

town, idly wondering what might be the result of his venture. It was not without difficulty that he had succeeded in raising the first instalment of Marks's mortgage money, and it crossed his mind that in the event of his losing to-night at poker he had but one clear day in which to make up the necessary total. But the prospect in nowise daunted him; he was a man who found his chief pleasure in facing difficulties and—overcoming them.

"Nothing venture, nothing win," he tritely remarked, as he pushed open the swing door of Macey's saloon.

In the lower room an indifferent game of pool was in progress, but the usual noisy crowd of spectators was but sparsely represented. Obviously, there was greater attraction upstairs.

Jim Scott strolled across to the bar and paid for the expected round of drinks. In Southern bar-rooms there is rigid etiquette in such matters.

"Any one upstairs?" he asked.

Half a dozen voices answered him. Plug Wilson's fame had spread.

"Best go up and take a hand," suggested a loafer.

"I don't mind if I do," answered the cowboy.

The upper chamber which he presently entered, followed by a small contingent from the pool room, was filled with men and tobacco smoke. Several games were already in progress, but at one of the tables sat

four men in desultory conversation. Plug Wilson and two of the others Jim mentally set down as "a pretty tough trio." The fourth was Bill Hartridge.

He had been losing intermittently most of the afternoon, and he greeted the cowboy warmly as the latter took the vacant chair. He also explained that they had been waiting for someone to make a fifth. And Jim, taking in the situation at a glance, was not surprised that they had not found one.

"Fifty-cent ante," announced Plug Wilson, as he executed a complicated shuffle with undeniable dexterity and laid the cards on the table. "Will that suit you?" he added.

"Capitally," answered the cowboy, picking up the pack. "What do you limit the raise to?"

"Five dollars," said Hartridge. "Make it ten if you've a mind to."

"All right, we'll make it ten," answered Jim. "And we'll have a fresh pack. These are getting dirty."

"That's so," said Plug Wilson, pensively biting the end off a fresh cigar with unmoved countenance, and noting that his new acquaintance had recognised the *angel-backs* at a glance. "Come to think of it, they are dirty."

The idea had apparently occurred to him for the first time.

Some of the loafers gathered round the table whilst the bar tender produced and opened a fresh pack.

Everybody replenished his glass, and counted out his little heap of notes and silver.

Then the game opened gaily enough with some fairly spirited betting between Bill Hartridge and Plug Wilson, the latter beating a flush with a full hand.

"Always lucky when I'm beat on the first round," said the loser, as he shuffled the pack for a fresh deal. And Jim noticed that this duty generally devolved upon him, excepting when the professional performed the delicate manœuvre for himself. In every phase of life are to be found men who shuffle the cards, while others play the game. Bill Hartridge was one of them.

But his omen apparently held good, for, in the course of the next hour, he succeeded in landing a couple of valuable "jack-pots."

The time slipped quickly by, and the play progressed without any special incident, for though the betting was brisk enough, the cards were pretty evenly distributed, and there was little to choose between four of the players, though Plug Wilson was a decided winner. The fact might easily have escaped the notice of any but the keenest observer, for it was the gambler's practice, from time to time, to transfer a portion of his winnings from the table to his pockets. He did it very neatly.

It was close on twelve o'clock, and Jim Scott had

made up his mind to a wasted evening, when the crisis came.

Plug Wilson dealt the cards, the cowboy "straddled," and drew one. The gambler did likewise, and Hart-ridge took two. The other pair dropped out, and looked on.

The cowboy opened the ball with a bet of five dollars. Plug Wilson raised it ten, and Hart-ridge paid fifteen to see. Three times he pursued the same tactics, but at the fourth round he shook his head.

"Guess I'll drop," he muttered.

"Ten dollars," said the cowboy, as he detached a note, and dropped it into the pool.

"And ten better," responded the gambler, covering it with a couple more.

"See you and raise you ten," said Jim.

It was obvious that two good hands were out. The men from the next table, having finished their own game, lounged across to see the fun. Both players were known as bold bettors, and it was the first time they had met.

"There's only two in it," said the gambler, "and time's short. I'll raise you fifty dollars, if you like."

"And fifty better," answered Jim.

He took a hundred dollar bill from Uncle Billy's contribution, and placed it with the rest.

The loafers looked at one another. This was gambling in earnest, and money down. They began to make small side bets amongst themselves. Plug Wilson was the favourite.

Time after time came his quiet formula. "Fifty dollars better."

And time after time did the cowboy respond. "And fifty more."

On the table before them both men had their cards face downwards. The heap at either elbow had dwindled low, and in the centre of the table was a very heavy stake.

Plug Wilson dipped leisurely into one pocket after another, as he repeated his monotonous remark. He was obviously not to be stopped whilst his capital held out. The fact lent fresh zest to the spectators. It was worth knowing what sum the gambler carried about his person.

Neither man's face betrayed the slightest trace of excitement. Both voices were calmly apathetic, and the side bets grew and multiplied.

"Fifty dollars," said the cowboy, as he added yet another bill from his slender remaining store.

The gambler paused, and looked into his eyes. Then slowly he withdrew from his pistol pocket a large handful of silver and four small notes. He counted them over, and turned to Bill Hartridge.

"Forty-seven dollars," he said. "Lend me three."

And, adding them to his own, Plug Wilson gently deposited the whole upon the table.

"I call you," he said, with a pleasant smile.

There was a moment's breathless pause, and every eye was fixed upon Jim Scott. The gambler leaned quietly forward, his chin upon his hands, unmoved to the last.

Deliberately the cowboy faced his cards upon the table without a word. And they were six, seven, eight, nine, and ten of clubs.

"A straight flush!" said Bill Hartridge, with an oath.

"Yes," was the response. "The first I ever held." And the gambler answered quietly.

"You're in luck. You ran up against four bullets!"

He laid four aces upon the table, and pushed the stakes over to his opponent.

"I'll take a drink with you," he added. "I haven't a red cent left."

It was literally true. He had backed his luck for every farthing he possessed.

Ten minutes later the sleepy bar tender turned out the lights in the deserted room, whilst the noisy crowd dispersed into the street. The cowboy lingered for a moment to slip a fifty dollar bill into his hand.

"Tell Plug Wilson you found it under his chair," he said.

And the gambler, receiving it, understood, and marvelled.

CHAPTER XIX

PAYING A MORTGAGE

THE bank parlour of the First National Bank of Orangeville was a very magnificent apartment. The huge safe which was built into one of its walls was capable of containing half a dozen full-grown men. A beautiful Turkey carpet graced its floor, and furniture and upholstery alike were gorgeous as might be. Three or four valuable oil paintings hung in indifferent lights, and a huge desk with brass rails occupied the centre.

On the eventful morning which was to decide the question nearest to his heart, Silas Marks entered this sanctum at an early hour. His manner was suave and urbane beyond his wont. No word had come to him from John Allison either in the shape of a proposal or an answer to his own. The Mayor of Orangeville felt that the game was in his own hands; he had named his price and he was in a position to enforce its payment.

As usual, he had many visitors during the morning, and he transacted his business with his customary method and acumen; though his eye wandered from time to time to the massive clock upon the chimney-

piece, and he looked up quickly each time his confidential clerk announced a fresh client.

On the stroke of twelve o'clock he was informed that Jim Scott wished to speak to him. He looked up from his papers with a shade of annoyance.

"Tell him I can spare ten minutes only," he said. But before the astonished clerk could deliver the message he found himself placed gently on one side.

"I shan't keep you more than that," said a voice at his elbow, and a tall figure in dusty riding boots strode past him into the room. The clerk, vaguely protesting, returned to his fellows; and Marks, without rising, motioned his visitor to a chair, after the most formal and frigid of greetings.

But Jim Scott ignored both the formality and the chair, standing square and erect in front of the banker's desk with his hands deep in the pockets of his loose shooting-coat and his wide-brimmed hat on the back of his head.

"You hold a mortgage deed of John Allison's for two thousand dollars, due to-day," he said, coming straight to the point without preamble. "I have come to see you about it."

Marks puckered up his face in a little cynical smile.

"Excuse me," he said. "I cannot accept any proposal, or enter into any discussion of the matter, except with Mr Allison himself."

"That's all right. There is no question of a proposal, and there's no need for any discussion."

"Then may I ask what it is that you wish to see me about?"

"I have brought your money, and I want your receipt," was the quiet reply.

Marks's face darkened; and the cowboy, noting it, exulted with unchanging countenance.

"This is extremely irregular," said the mayor. The suddenness of the position had nonplussed him, and for the moment his customary coolness deserted him, though he realised the futility of his remark.

"It is as regular as possible," responded the cowboy, as he drew a thick note-book from his pocket. "The money is all in notes and consequently a legal tender. The receipt was drawn up by a lawyer at the Record Office. If you will take the money, sign the receipt, and hand over the deed, I will go round there and settle the business. I said I would be back in ten minutes."

He counted out two thousand dollars on the desk before him, and laid the receipt by its side. Marks took up the notes and recounted them carefully. There was an angry light in his eyes, and the muscles round his mouth quivered a little. He was slowly grasping the situation.

He gathered up the money without a word, and

walked over to the great safe, deposited the notes on a shelf inside it and shut the door, turning the combination lock as he did so. Then he sat down in his revolving chair and folded his arms with an exasperating smile.

But Jim Scott was not to be drawn so easily. He stood and looked at him for a moment in silence, and Marks's eyes dropped.

"What's the joke?" said the cowboy gently.

"I was thinking," answered the mayor pensively, "how easy it would be for an unscrupulous man to keep that money and defy you."

The cowboy laughed aloud.

"And I was thinking," he answered, "how easy it would be for a determined man to blow your brains out and plead justifiable homicide."

The mayor raised his eyes quickly. Jim Scott was carefully examining the lock of a pistol which he had taken from his pocket.

Instantly Marks changed his ground.

"Do you know," he asked, in a different tone, "that I could have you arrested for carrying a concealed weapon inside the town limits?"

"I suppose you could, but you won't risk it. I might prove that I carried it in self-defence. You're a dangerous man to be shut up alone with, Marks, and you might mistake me for an armed burglar."

There was the slightest possible emphasis on the last two words.

It was a bow drawn at a venture, but the arrow went straight home. Despite his habitual self-control the mayor could not conceal a sudden start. Worse than that, he knew that the other had seen it. But his voice was steady enough as he asked slowly:

"What do mean by that?"

"Exactly what I say! You're a very clever man, but you were within an ace of making a fool of yourself just now. It might have worked if I had been a fool too; but I'm not. That's why I took the precaution of going to the Record Office first. Now, do you intend to sign that receipt and give me the deed or not?"

"Certainly I do," answered Marks, with his most urbane smile. "You don't play euchre, do you?" he added, apparently irrelevantly.

"Sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"Because you don't seem to appreciate the value of holding the joker."

The cowboy laughed.

"Ah, I see. Well, it was your deal and you played the knave. I only followed suit."

Marks looked at him for a moment in silence, and a grim smile gathered upon his face.

"One of us two will have to be euchred before this game's played out," he said.

The cowboy looked at the clock.

"I'm afraid I am keeping you more than ten minutes," he answered pointedly.

Marks smiled without speaking; his last conceit appeared to have amused him. He drew over the receipt and carefully read it through, afterwards affixing his signature. Then he re-opened the safe, selected the required deed, and handed both papers to the cowboy. Jim examined them for a moment minutely, folded them up and placed them in his pocket.

"Thank you," he said. "I think that is all."

"I think not," was the reply. "I can spare you ten minutes more, and—we can come to an understanding."

"By all means," said Jim. "I'm in no hurry."

Marks had re-seated himself, and the smile had died out from his face, leaving it pale and very determined. The hand which rested on his desk was tight clenched and the contraction of his eyebrows had drawn an ominous line upon his forehead.

"You've settled John Allison's business for him," he said. "Now, we'll come to your own. Do you think it is wise to interfere in a matter which doesn't concern you?"

"Perhaps it does concern me."

The voice was quite quiet, but in the very carelessness of the man's whole attitude there was a tinge of defiance.

"How is that?"

"I have given you Allison's money," said the cowboy. "I don't know that I owe you an explanation as well."

"I don't believe it was Allison's money at all. I believe it was your own."

"Do you think I am a philanthropist?" asked Jim.

"I think you're a damned fool!" said Marks angrily.

"I'm certain of it," was the quiet reply. "But it doesn't seem to affect the question."

The dark line on Marks's forehead deepened. His temper was getting the better of him and the other's coolness was exasperating.

"I want to know just how we stand," he said, after a moment's pause. "Show your hand and I'll show mine."

"Thanks," said the cowboy, "I've seen it already. And what's more I've trumped your best trick."

"You think so?" said the mayor.

"I know it," answered the cowboy.

Marks set his teeth hard, choking back the words which rose to his lips. The hand which rested on his desk twitched spasmodically.

"Will you give me a plain answer to a plain question?" he said.

"That depends whether you have a right to ask it."

"I have the right."

"Prove it, and I'll answer," said the cowboy.

"I will prove it," was the retort. "A week ago I asked John Allison's consent to make his daughter my wife."

"So I heard; and you offered two thousand dollars as the price. Well, you've drawn the money, and the deal's off."

"You haven't answered my question."

"You haven't asked one. You merely stated a fact—incorrectly."

"Because you interrupted me. Do you propose to marry the girl, or do you not?"

"Ah! That I don't recognise your right to ask."

"And you refuse to answer?"

"Distinctly."

"I thought as much. Then I must draw the only obvious deduction."

The insolence of the sneer was almost unbearable. The cowboy's hand, thrust deep into his coat pocket, closed tight on the butt of his revolver. But his self-control did not desert him.

"I take no interest in your deductions," he answered, "but I warn you not to go too far: I don't want to lose my temper."

Again Marks paused, while for a moment the men's eyes met. And once more the cowboy had the best of the encounter. His adversary could not meet his gaze, for he never knew how nearly he had found the vulnerable spot in his harness. In the silence which

ensued, the loud ticking of the clock upon the chimney-piece suddenly asserted itself. Simultaneously both became aware of it and the mayor rose to his feet.

"I have only one thing more to say," he remarked. "This isn't the first time you and I have opposed one another and it won't be the last. You think you've bested me to-day, but it's the worst day's work you've done for a very long time. I'm a dangerous man to make an enemy of."

The cowboy smiled as he turned towards the door.

"I think I prefer your enmity to your friendship," he answered lightly.

"You think so now," said Marks, and his voice quivered under the passion which he strove to control. "But you won't when I've finished with you. The man isn't born yet who can defy me without regretting it."

Jim Scott smiled.

"You're a poor judge of character, Marks, if you think you can frighten me with a threat."

The mayor strode over to his side and the light of furious hate which glowed for a second behind his eyes was not pleasant to look upon.

"I'll give you one more," he hissed. "When May Allison is my wife, as she will be before long, she shall pay for her lover's insolence——"

He paused, cowed for a moment by the look which came into the other's face, and instinctively he gripped

the chair which stood beside him; for he knew that he had gone too far. For a moment he held his life in his hand and his breath came in short quick gasps. He scarcely recognised the voice which answered him.

"Before you marry May Allison," it said distinctly, "I will blow your brains out. Open that door and let me go, or I might be tempted to do it now."

Without a word the Mayor of Orangeville obeyed the order.

In the sunlit street Jim Scott drew a deep breath and pulled himself together. Mechanically he turned into the Record Office and there transacted his business.

The men with whom he dealt noted the expression upon his face and wisely forebore to prolong the interview. But they drew their own deductions, and there was but one topic of conversation in the Orangeville Club that night.

For they knew that the Allison mortgage had been released, and one of their number reported that Jim Scott had delivered to Arthur Manners a sealed packet for immediate delivery to May Allison.

And even while they gossiped and surmised, the man under discussion was galloping steadily southwards, fighting out the problem of his life.

That document which he had promised to deliver with his own hand had been entrusted to another, and for the first time his courage had failed him.

In the solitude of the silent pine woods he found himself face to face with the question which had nearly cost a man his life.

“Do you propose to marry the girl or do you not?”

And he could not answer it.

CHAPTER XX

A CRISIS

ANOTHER Florida summer had dragged its weary length away; and the tired earth, refreshed by a long looked-for rainy season, had welcomed the coming winter as convalescents welcome the day of their release from the dread monotony of the sick room. The marvellous recuperative powers of soil and climate had worked their spell, and under the care of the great physician—Nature—the patient orange trees had taken on new lease of life.

Once more a languishing industry bid fair to hold its own, and from the glossy dark green branches the ripening fruit began to make a goodly show. Nothing, indeed, to that of former years, for the effects of a three nights' frost are not wiped out in less than twice as many years; but an earnest to the careful husbandman of better times to come.

Here and there a thriftless planter had gone under, leaving as monument a sickly yellow orange grove to recall his failure, and serving to enforce the trite old principle of the survival of the fittest.

And, with the changing seasons, that small com-

munity which populates the most southerly State of the Union had changed in turn. A twist of the great kaleidoscope of time had rearranged the pattern.

Some of the units, indeed, had dropped from their accustomed places. A few had crossed the seas, and yet a few had taken up their final homesteads in nameless sandy cemeteries.

And Arthur Manners, with a discretion beyond his years, had followed the counsels of his common sense against the dictates of his inclination.

Somewhere in the highway of most men's lives there is a sign-post where the two roads divide. And ever, at the cross-ways, a woman stands. One of the roads, that which he would fain follow in her company, lies smooth, easy and pleasant to his view, as far as the eye may reach, though none can see what lies beyond its turning. But the other is steep, rugged and very lonely. Yet that is the road which wise men take.

Before he decided to follow it Arthur Manners paused at the cross-ways to ask the woman a question. And she answered it, even as he had known that she must answer. Then he set his teeth hard and accepted his fate with a smile which was meant to hide his pain and which did not deceive her, for she was very sorry. And he took the lonely road and marvelled, as he put mile after mile behind him, that it became less rugged and uninviting as he trudged along it, for it led him across the Atlantic and finally, with

many windings, into a snug and peaceful berth in the great City where men of common sense may reap rewards in the service of a golden god, instead of offering the sacrifice of years at the shrine of a female idol of flesh and blood.

And that which puzzled Manners most was the fact that of all his Florida acquaintances, there was but one man from whom he was really sorry to part, and that one the man of all others whom he had most reason to dislike. For it was Jim Scott who had won the love of the woman he had hoped to make his wife, and yet it was from Jim Scott alone that he had parted with true and genuine regret.

Two others shared with him in that regret, and with far more reason, albeit one of them never knew or suspected it. For Providence had decreed, with that extraordinary attention to detail which men call coincidence, that at the most critical period of their married life, Luxmoore and his wife should be given another chance. And Providence therefore ordained that a childless and affluent old gentleman should leave this world and bequeath to his niece a charming little English property and a very comfortable income. And this was a master stroke of diplomacy on the part of the aforesaid Providence; for nothing in the world could have had so salutary an effect on both, as the fact that in the enjoyment of their unexpected good fortune, the husband became dependent upon the wife.

Within a few short months the bond between them became a far closer one than wasted years of Florida life had ever forged.

So they, too, went home to England with kindly feelings in their hearts for the man whom one of them knew had come to her rescue at the most critical moment a woman's life can know.

It was May Allison whom these changes chiefly affected. Living alone with the father, who had never been quite in touch with her, the companionship of Arthur Manners had become very pleasant to her. Essentially a gentleman, he had never presumed upon their friendship; and it was only after his departure that the girl realised how almost indispensable he had become in the drear monotony of Florida routine. But a short time ago life had seemed very bright to her, for the renewal of her sister's friendship had removed her greatest care. And the man to whom she owed it, the man whom she worshipped with that devotion which a woman can accord but once in a life-time, had told her that one day he should claim payment in full.

And now her sister had gone, Arthur Manners had gone, and May was very lonely. Though both tacitly ignored the subject, neither she nor her father could forget the interview which had taken place between them in regard to Marks's proposal. It had aged the girl a little in more ways than one, and it had slightly

awed the man. Both were grateful to their deliverer in very different ways, for, whilst May owed him her freedom and her happiness, John Allison only owed him two thousand dollars. There are debts which it is pleasant to recall, and others, more numerous, which it is not.

For many months Marks had held aloof from the English colony, for his plans had been rudely shattered at the very moment when he thought he held the winning card, and he needed time to build them up again. But that which he needed more, and which he never lost sight of, was his revenge on the man who had got the better of him. Revolving many schemes in his busy brain, he bided his time and made no move. It was the lull before the storm.

Meanwhile Jim Scott had buried himself in his Southern homestead, only emerging very rarely from his seclusion. On the few occasions when she saw him, May noted, with that intuition which love brings to the most innocent of girls, that he was setting a very strong guard upon himself. Calm and inscrutable as he had always appeared, she was keenly conscious now that there was something below the surface which he fought down only with an effort.

He told her that he was very busy with his cattle and ponies, that many things claimed his attention, and that he found it almost impossible to get away from home.

And the girl, turning over a new page in the history of woman's life, knew and understood.

But those few months were probably the hardest in the cowboy's life. Characteristically he fought out his battle alone, and he did not spare himself. From the day when circumstances, fostered by his natural inclination, had pointed to that independent life which he had so promptly embraced, the many difficulties he had encountered and overcome had been in the main physical, and such as called merely for determination and strength of will. And the necessity for those two qualities had developed and fostered them.

Absolute self-reliance is rarely, if ever, attained by those who spring from the lower ranks of life. The dogged gameness which denotes the thoroughbred is as potent a factor in the human as it is in the animal world. Trite as it be, the old maxim, "Blood will tell," holds its own the world over. There is more, far more, in the accident of gentle birth than a revolutionary age cares to admit. And to the indomitable spirit which it engenders may be attributed many things which are otherwise inexplicable.

That lurking spirit had led Jim Scott successfully—as our little circle ranks success—through many a difficult phase of a very difficult career, only to bring him face to face at last with the problem of his life. To a reserved nature such as his there can be no more terrible internal conflict than that which is waged

between the desire of the man of action to face an inevitable *dénouement*, and the life-long habit which deters an iron will from confessing its weakness.

From the first he had not attempted to deceive himself; he knew that he was drifting, slowly drifting. Almost from the day when he had made May Allison's acquaintance, he had realised in all its bitterness the consequences of his life's great mistake. And he had imagined, as men have imagined before him, that he was strong enough to fight it down. To-day he realised, uncompromising, that he had fought and lost. Criticising himself impartially, as only men of his type can, he did not hesitate to confess that the part he had played was a despicable one.

With brutal directness he put the situation to himself, and it was not a pleasant one. He loved a woman whom he could not marry.

The grim humour of it almost amused him. Almost, but not quite, for on the instant came the reflection that worse lay behind.

The woman loved him.

That was the bitterness of it. Had it been on his side only the situation might have been faced alone, fought out and conquered in solitude, only another episode in the drama of life.

But he had taught the woman to love him! From that there was no escape. Not deliberately had he done it, but none the less effectually. Circumstances

had been in league against him, true, but might he not have foreseen the result and counteracted it? He might; and he had not done it.

Was it by accident or design, he asked himself, that the man of whom he had made an enemy had probed his weakness and driven home the shaft which had rankled day by day until its pain had become unendurable?

"Do you intend to marry the girl or do you not?"

Then suddenly, pacing backwards and forwards on the shaded verandah of his lonely home, a little grim smile flitted over his face and set itself into an uncompromising expression which his friends knew well and dreaded. On the instant he had made up his mind. Come what might, he would go to the girl and tell her the truth, the whole truth. To-day he would do it and at once.

He drew a long breath, for he had counted the cost; but he did not flinch. The prospect of immediate action braced him with a sudden keen resolve which sent the blood coursing through his veins.

He walked quickly to the paddock, and instinctively ran his eye over the herd of ponies that thronged it. It occurred to him vaguely that there were too many for the grazing which it afforded. He ought to have weeded them out long ago. He laughed aloud that the thought should have struck him at such a moment. A strange sense of exhilaration was upon him.

What he sought was not there, and he turned towards the stables. In the second box from the door was the animal he wanted, the grey mare he had ridden out of Maryville on the first stage of his journey to Jacksonville many months ago.

There was an irony in it which appealed to him strongly. In his new mood the contrast between his object then and his purpose to-day stood out in vivid distinctness. He cursed the sense of grim humour which had put the thought into his mind.

He had reached his hand for the bridle which hung upon the wall, when he paused and reflected. Providence, with a far grimmer humour than his own, saw fit to interfere with his purpose at a very crucial moment. The pettiness of the detail made him laugh again.

He must wait until Jake came back.

It was one of those trivial incidents which occur in the crises of men's lives, and it set Jim thinking. What had delayed the negro to-day, of all days?

Since they had worked together he had never known the man to be late before. And it was his practice never to leave the place untenanted. One of three was always there, the cowboy himself, Jake his factotum, or the latter's brother. And now, in the moment when he longed for action, he was left alone. It was even curious that he should have sent both

men together last night for the weekly stores, instead of one as usual.

They had taken the waggon and gone down to Jessop's Ford to meet the river steamer and bring back supplies. That was the common custom; they rested the ponies there and stopped the night, starting back at seven o'clock in the morning.

To-day they were late, very late. They should have been back two hours ago.

Jim paced the paddock, impatiently waiting. He hated above all things to be checked in a moment of decision. Once his mind was made up he required immediate action; he could collect his thoughts and settle his plans as he galloped.

He halted and leaned over the fence rail, whence he could command the outlet from the hammock above into the clearing, looking at the sun and calculating the distance which lay between him and the accomplishment of his purpose.

At last a faint sound came to him, a sound so faint that none but an ear trained to catch the unwonted snapping of a twig or the note of a frightened bird would have detected it. The waggon was crossing the creek. Another moment and it came into view.

The cowboy started and shaded his eyes with his hand, while a sudden hard look came into his face.

Jake was driving, slowly and sullenly, a circumstance almost more unusual than his delay. Behind him in

the waggon, surrounded by a far heavier load than usual, sat his brother.

And on the seat by his side was a woman, the first who had ever entered the homestead.

For one ghastly moment Jim Scott trembled in every limb with a sense of sudden faintness; the next he drew a deep breath, and, turning, strode towards the house.

And when the waggon rounded the paddock rails its occupants found him standing on the verandah awaiting their arrival. On his face was a grim, determined smile.

In that moment he had faced the crisis of his life.

CHAPTER XXI

EUCHRED !

THE heavy waggon rattled round to the door, and the tired ponies pulled up willingly enough, stretching their lean necks as soon as the pressure of their collars was removed. Jake sat grimly and sulkily silent, while his brother jumped nimbly to the ground. Instinctively both men sought their master's eye and waited.

The woman spoke first, with a ringing laugh, and her voice was rich and musical.

"Didn't expect to see me down here, eh? I hope you're pleased! Good gracious, what an out of the way place to live in!" She looked round. "It's pretty, though," she added.

"I'm glad you approve of it," was the cold reply.

The sound of his voice had a curious effect upon her, and she looked at him for a moment attentively. Her own voice was harder when she spoke again.

"I suppose you want to know how I found you out and what I've come for. Help me out and I'll tell you."

She stood up, and Jim gravely held out his hand and helped her to alight. She was a tall woman, with

a striking face, which must have been very beautiful before the hard look had crept in to disfigure it. Carefully "made up" as she was, it was lacking now in womanly softness. A mass of reddish golden hair crowned her shapely head, and her big brown eyes were singularly expressive. But the general effect was rather of boldness and determination than refinement, and the full red lips conveyed an impression of sensuous cruelty.

"I've brought you a letter," she announced, as she stood by the cowboy's side and shook out the folds of her handsome gown. She was well-dressed, too well-dressed for the sandy journey she had just accomplished. A fine powdery dust had settled upon her clothes, and lay thick upon her broad-brimmed hat.

He took the envelope from her hand and opened it in silence. A half-sheet of notepaper was all it contained, and over the autograph of the Mayor of Orangeville was written the single word—*Euchred!*

Jim laughed grimly as he tore it into fragments and dropped them on the sand. His eye rested on the heavily laden waggon, and he turned to the woman.

"You've brought a lot of luggage," he said. "Do you propose to make a long stay?"

"We shall see," she answered; and her voice was as cold and hard as his own.

Jim turned to the negro.

"Bring those trunks inside," he said, "and take the

stores round to the back. Then saddle the grey mare; I shall want her in ten minutes."

The woman bit her lip hard and checked an impulse to speak. All trace of laughter had died out of her eyes, and her face was steadily hardening. There was something in the cowboy's manner which she could not understand, and she was faintly conscious of a feeling of being slightly awed. The feeling was a new one, and it annoyed her.

"You had better come inside."

Jim pushed back the French window which opened into his sitting-room and held it for her to pass. She swept into the room with rather exaggerated dignity, and he followed her slowly. She looked round with a little involuntary exclamation of pleasure, for she was very keenly susceptible to effect, and the charming novelty of the unexpected appealed to her even as it had appealed to Arthur Manners. A quick impulse swayed her, and she turned to Jim with a gesture which she checked as she met his eyes. Then she laughed a bitter, mocking laugh.

"It's an affectionate greeting for a husband and wife after five years."

"Six, this month," he corrected.

There was a moment's pause before he continued.

"I suppose you have something to say to me. Perhaps you will begin at once. I have only a few minutes to spare."

"Yes, I have a good deal to say to you. And before I begin I think I'll have a drink, if you please. I suppose you've got some whisky in the house."

A jug of iced water stood on the table by his side. He filled a glass and handed it to her.

"It's better for you than whisky," he said coolly.

Into her eyes there came a sudden furious light, and her whole face quivered with a burst of uncontrollable passion. For one instant she held the glass in her hand, the next it was shattered into a hundred fragments at the cowboy's feet.

He never moved a muscle, keeping his eyes fixed straight upon her own, while her bosom heaved tumultuously, and her breath came in short, quick gasps. She turned from him and paced the little room, her hands tight clinched behind her back.

The cowboy leaned carelessly against the chimney-piece, lighted a cigarette, and blew contemplative smoke-rings while he watched her.

It was several minutes before she spoke. Slowly she drew off her gloves and removed her hat. The hand which put back the heavy masses of hair from her forehead glittered and sparkled with its weight of diamonds. In the action, and the long pause which followed, there was something eminently theatrical. The change of voice, too, was carefully studied. Whether her passion had died out as rapidly as it had sprung up, or whether it merely smouldered beneath

an assumed calm, it was quite impossible to tell. On and off the stage the woman was a consummate actress.

"You've changed a good deal in—six years," she said. "You take things more quietly than you used to. So you've been living all this time, under an assumed name, in the wilds of Florida. I suppose you never expected that I should find you out?"

"I don't know that I ever gave the matter a thought."

"I daresay you did not even know that I was in America?"

"I couldn't help knowing it. The papers have been busy enough with your name."

"It's curious how small the world is, isn't it? And it's full of coincidences too. I believe you know Cecil Featherstone," she added significantly, watching his face.

"I do know him, thoroughly."

"Yes? Well, he joined my company last summer."

"Indeed. A most desirable acquisition, I should think."

"He saw a photograph of you, and recognised it immediately. And he was interested to learn that the man who called himself Jim Scott was my husband."

"He would be—naturally."

"A month ago I met another of your acquaintances, the man who sent you that letter, Silas Marks. He

took an interest in Jim Scott too, and a very practical one, for he offered me a week's engagement at the Orangeville Theatre, and I took it. By the way, you don't seem to be popular in these parts."

"Amongst your friends? Probably not."

She ignored the sneer; seeking, woman-like, a vulnerable point before she unmasked her battery.

"I've only met two men who knew you. You have succeeded in making enemies of them both."

"You couldn't have paid me a greater compliment."

His imperturbability began to exasperate her. The husband she remembered had been a very different man from this tall cowboy who looked calmly down upon her with barely concealed contempt. She realised that she was a little in awe of him.

"The stories I heard of you were not pleasant ones for a wife to listen to," she exclaimed angrily. "I should not have minded Cecil's, *that* was a married woman! But the other is a different thing. When I heard that you were in love with a girl, I thought it was about time for me to interfere. Now, do you know what I intend to do?"

"Not in the least."

"To-morrow I shall introduce myself to Miss May Allison."

At the mention of the girl's name his eyes contracted slightly. Otherwise he gave no sign.

"I'm afraid that you will be too late to do much harm. She will know the truth to-night."

"To-night? From whom?"

"From me."

The woman's anger blazed up as suddenly as before.

"From you? Do you suppose that I shall let you go to her?"

"I certainly shall go. But I had not thought of asking your permission."

She moved quickly in front of him, and the light which gleamed behind her eyes was not pleasant to look upon.

"You shall *not* go," she hissed.

He shrugged his shoulders, dropping the end of his cigarette into the empty fire-place.

"We shall see," he answered quietly.

For the moment the woman was nonplussed. Few of her sex ever realise the utter horror in which the masculine mind holds anything approaching "a scene." It is fortunate, indeed, that it should be so, for the knowledge is too dangerous a weapon to be trusted in the hands of an unscrupulous woman. But she could not fail to note and to contrast his present apathy with that shrinking from quarrel and argument which had formerly characterised him. With the sudden conviction that she had met her master, she instantly changed her tactics.

The extraordinary celerity with which the woman

could vary her moods did infinite credit to her stage training. In the moment's pause which followed Jim's remark, all trace of anger died away from her face. When she turned to him again her expression was one of weary sadness; and in the depth of her brown eyes there was a suspicion of tears. Pitched in its lower key, her voice was singularly musical and effective.

"Forgive me," she said. "I hardly knew what I was saying. It is so long since I have seen you, and—everything seems so different. I don't know exactly what I expected—I suppose I had no right to expect anything—but I never thought that you would treat me like this. Listen," she pleaded earnestly, "and I'll tell you the truth. It *wasn't* the stories they told me that brought me back, I swear it wasn't. I wanted to see you again, to be with you, to hear your voice. I know that I have been to blame and I'm sorry, truly sorry. I want to undo the past, to begin all over again. Can't we begin again—together?"

The little pleading gesture and the quick movement of the upturned eyes was perfect.

But she might as well have appealed to a marble statue.

The grim smile only deepened on his face. The trickery of it all was so obvious; he knew it so well. Only he marvelled that it should ever have imposed upon him.

"Six years ago," he said slowly, "we agreed to

separate. Each of us was to take our own line. It is you, not I, who have broken the agreement. And it is you who must take the consequences."

"Ah, yes, I know, I know. But I have been punished bitterly enough already. You don't know, you can't guess, how I have suffered. Do you think my life has been a happy one since I left you?"

"I really don't know. It was of your own choosing."

"You drove me to it! I would have given up the stage, I would have given up anything in the world to keep your love. When I lost that, nothing else mattered. Oh yes, I know I had my faults, but I could have conquered them. I *would* have conquered them if only you had cared, if only you had tried to help me. What have I done to you that you hate me so?"

"You've only ruined my life, that's all," he answered bitterly.

She knew that her self-control was giving way, but she made a desperate effort to keep herself in check.

"Was it all my fault? Was I the only one to blame? Can't you understand what a woman feels when the only man in all the world she ever cared for begins to tire of her? I *did* care for you, you know I did."

"You chose a curious way of showing it. Let us stick to facts. You know as well as I do that you made it utterly impossible for us to live together."

"I don't know it!" She faced him with a note of challenge in voice and manner. "What was it that came between us?"

"Drink, and your diabolical temper."

She might have expected the answer and prepared herself for it. But women of her type, though often clever, are rarely logical.

"I have got the better of them both." She said it almost defiantly.

He pointed to the fragments of splintered glass which strewn the floor between them.

"So it seems," he answered coldly.

She made one final desperate effort to keep herself in hand and to control her voice.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry, very sorry; but you goaded me to it. You could make me anything in the world if you only cared for me, and you won't try. And yet," her voice dropped very low, "you loved me once, Cyril. You can't deny it."

Despite himself he winced at the sound of the old name.

"I believe I did," he answered brutally. "But I was very young then."

In an instant her art and her self-control fell from her like a mask and she threw reason and policy to the winds. With the fury of a wild beast she turned upon him, and her face grew positively ugly. The floodgates of her passion once opened, the stream of

words rushed forth unchecked, gathering volume as she lashed herself into a fury, the like of which he never remembered to have seen. It was a ghastly experience. For five hideous minutes she stood there and poured forth all that was lowest and foulest in her nature.

She taunted him, abused him, swore at him ; using language more revolting, more utterly depraved than he had ever dreamed a woman's tongue could frame.

And all the while he stood with folded arms, a cynical smile upon his lips, scorn and contempt in his eyes.

It was the bitterest moment of his life; the beginning of his punishment. And even in that moment it came upon him that worse lay behind, that all this horror was as nothing to the expiation of his folly which lay before him still.

Her furious passion worked itself out. She flung herself face downwards on the couch, burying her face in the cushions with a burst of angry tears. And she knew that she had burned her boats behind her.

Then he spoke, and his voice cut the silence with clear distinctness.

"So long as I live," he said, "I shall never willingly see or speak to you again. For the present you will remain here, because I do not intend to turn you out into the woods, though, God knows, I should have little enough compunction in doing it. I shall leave instruc-

tions with my men how to treat you, and when I have decided what to do with you, I will let you know."

He turned towards the door, and she sprang to her feet, maddened by the utter contempt in his voice.

"I shall do exactly what I choose," she began. But as he turned and faced her there was that in his eyes which literally cowed her.

"You will do exactly as I tell you."

For one moment they stood and faced each other, husband and wife; the woman angry and defiant, the man strong, masterful, determined.

Before that look in his eyes her own quailed and fell. She dared not speak. Hysterical and overwrought, she staggered back as though she feared that he would strike her, and her face turned ashy white beneath her paint.

Then, quite suddenly, without a word or sound, she sank down upon the floor at his feet in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXII

SUNSET

It was fortunate indeed that the grey pony was in the best and hardest of condition, otherwise her rider's impatience must have told its tale long ere they had reached their goal.

To gallop over thirty miles of sandy road under the heat of a Florida sun is no small feat of endurance for the wiriest of country-breds ; to do it at breakneck speed under the pressure of a sharp pair of spurs is a physical impossibility. Rarely indeed did Jim Scott's discretion and knowledge of pace so far desert him as to render him oblivious of his mount, but to-day it seemed for some minutes that he was conscious only of the dire necessity of putting all possible distance between himself and the horror which lay behind.

And he had resolved that he must see May Allison before nightfall.

Even at the moment it struck him as curious that his mind should dwell incessantly upon a hundred petty and unimportant details rather than upon the tragedy of his life. He found himself wondering how Featherstone had described the circumstances under

which they had made one another's acquaintance. The man had lied, of course, as men of his type always lie when the narrative concerns themselves and a woman ; but the cowboy felt that he would like to have heard his adversary's account of their meeting in Jacksonville. In any case the actor had vindicated his promise of revenge, and the rest did not matter much.

Nothing mattered much this afternoon, except to get forward and to see May Allison.

It was strange too that the woman should have met Marks. That was what they called "the long arm of coincidence," he supposed. He speculated upon the terms which the woman had been offered for her engagement at the Orangeville Theatre. Then he wondered whether Marks had kept the story to himself. What if it had reached the English colony already ?

The grey mare bounded forward under the sudden pressure of her rider's knees, and recalled him to a sense of his position. He leaned forward, patting her neck and steadying her into a long swinging canter.

The land agent had worked his *coup* dramatically, there was no denying that. It was a master stroke to confront the husband and wife without a single word of warning or of preparation.

Euchred ! That described the position exactly. Again his thoughts wandered off at a tangent.

This time he smiled grimly as he recalled the expression of his taciturn negro's face, and reflected on the difficulty which they must have had in inflicting a lady passenger upon Jake. He wondered what persuasion Marks had used, what the woman had said: and again came the sudden revulsion of feeling.

What did it all matter? What did anything in the world matter now, excepting May?

For the first time he began to realise what his love for this girl had really meant to him; how it had grown and strengthened until it had come to dominate every feeling and impulse of his life.

Curbed and controlled by the exercise of his iron will, there lay beneath the outward calm of this man's reserve a latent force of passion that smouldered unsuspected and unseen. The habit of years had schooled and disciplined it beyond all recognition, but none the less keenly did the fierce fire rage.

It is not a temperament to be envied. Happier, a thousand times, the man who meets the crisis of his life with a paroxysm of rage or of grief than he who, with unmoved face, suffers and smiles in silence. Anything rather than that terrible internal conflict which gives no outward sign.

With grave, set face and wild rebellion at his heart, Jim Scott galloped steadily onwards through the dreary pine woods, alone with his thoughts.

And down in the English colony, leaning upon the

little white gate which commanded her view of the outer world, May Allison stood and watched the lingering rays of the setting sun as they faded slowly away behind the background of a distant belt of pine trees. Already faintly outlined on the horizon the moon's clear disc was visible, and the evening was hushed and breathless. The girl was quite alone, for her father had sought the unwonted relaxation of a neighbouring whist party and she had not cared to accompany him.

She had grown to love the solitude as no girl of her age should either love or understand it, and she had learned to feel the spell of the silent moonlight nights even as her sister had long ago predicted that she would.

To-night, in her loneliness, her thoughts wandered, as many a time they had wandered before, to that long ago evening when she had listened in this same spot to the song of the Suwanee River sung by the man she loved. And, keenly conscious of the subtle changes which the passing years had wrought for her, she marvelled at the external sameness of her surroundings. Everything, except herself, appeared to have remained unchanged.

Then, as now, the cheerful glow of an irregular line of stump fires dotted a clearing on the further side of the avenue, where a gang of negro-workers had set them burning before they wended their way, half an

hour ago, to the local store. And overhead the bull-bats swooped and hovered with their strange hoarse cry, just as she had watched them then. But down the silent avenue to-night there came no sound of song.

Nothing, it seemed, except herself had changed. She had passed from girlhood into womanhood, and her life was very lonely. She could not analyse the subtle transition which the years had worked. How had she lost the love of companionship for which other girls craved? How had her friends, one by one, slipped away and left her? And above all, why did she want this loneliness, why had she learnt to seek the solitude and to love it? In her heart of hearts she knew the answer which she dared not put into words.

And realising it she marvelled that with the revelation there came no sense of shame, no feeling of resentment against the man who was spoiling her life and whom she could neither fathom nor understand. She was conscious of a vague feeling of injustice, but she did not blame him. In all good women the capacity for self-sacrifice is very strong.

With a weary little sigh the girl was about to turn towards the lonely house when the sound of distant hoof beats reached her ear. Peering down the darkening avenue she recognised horse and rider with a wild thrill of happiness. Her heart beat very high and the hot blood, coursing through her veins, flushed her pale

cheeks. In an instant all sense of lassitude and loneliness had fled. It was a very dangerous mood.

A moment later, as he halted by her side, Jim Scott noted the glad light which leapt into her eyes, and he set his teeth hard as he dismounted, for that which lay before him still was almost beyond his strength. But his purpose never faltered, and the face which looked into her own was quietly, gravely determined.

The lean grey mare, relieved of her rider's weight, shook herself luxuriously from head to tail like a dog that has just left the water. The gallop had been an unwontedly severe one.

Mechanically the cowboy slacked the girths as he returned the girl's greeting.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Jim," she said. "I am all by myself and I was feeling so lonely. Have you ridden far?" she added. "The mare looks tired."

"Yes. We've come from the Homestead. May I put her in the stable for half-an-hour? I can't stay more than that. But I'm glad your father is away, I want to speak to you alone to-night."

She waited for him on the verandah, her thoughts in a strange tumultuous whirl. Something in his voice warned her of an impending crisis, and her woman's intuition filled her with a vague sense of foreboding.

The cowboy led the mare to the stable and methodically unsaddling her, turned her into an empty loose

box. He gave her half-a-dozen mouthfuls of water and a small armful of hay. Then he paused and patted her neck.

"It's the last time we stable here, old girl," he said wistfully. "And God knows where we go to-night."

He drew a long breath, as one who braces himself for an ordeal, and strode back to the house.

In the partial shadow of the deep verandah he noted the graceful girlish figure in her clinging soft white dress, with two deep crimson roses at her breast, and as he came to her side he contrasted the eager up-turned face with that of the woman who had wrecked his life. But his own face gave no sign.

The girl drew forward a long deck chair and sank among its cushions with a contented little sigh while she pointed to another.

"Come and sit down and tell me all your news," she said. "Then I'll give you some supper. And it's all nonsense to say that you are going in half an hour, because you've got to stay till father comes home and you haven't been to see me for an age."

The words were natural enough of themselves, but nervousness robbed them of the true ring, and both of them knew it.

For answer Jim Scott stooped and took her face in both his hands. Long and earnestly he looked into her eyes, and very tenderly he kissed her.

And the girl's foreboding strengthened into certainty.

"Jim," she said quickly. "What is it you came to tell me to-night? What is it?"

He stood behind her chair with his hands laid lightly on her shoulders; and she, half turning, looked up wistfully into his face. The moon rose steadily in the cloud-flecked sky, encroaching on the shadows of the verandah, but the light was still too dim for her to see his expression. The silence was intense.

"I promised you long ago," he said, and his voice was almost unnaturally calm and controlled, "that some day you should hear the story of my life. I have come to redeem my promise."

She shuddered at his words, filled with a dread she could not fathom; and in her fear she cried aloud:

"No, no, Jim. I don't want to hear it. Not to-night. Don't tell it me to-night."

"It must be to-night," he answered, and his voice was a little less even than before.

She grasped one of the strong hands in both her own, and the action gave him courage, though his mouth was dry and parched and the muscles around it quivered as he spoke. Face to face with the inevitable, his nature prompted him to go straight to his point without preamble. But his love for her restrained him. He felt that he had no right to strike without some warning, to deal his deadly wound without giving her time to prepare for the blow. Watching her face in

the shadow, it seemed to him that his words rang false and strained like a speech in a melodrama.

"For years," he said, "I have been living a false life : acting a lie. The very name you know me by is not my own."

And again she pleaded, pressing the hand she held between her own.

"Not to-night, Jim. Ah, don't tell me to-night." But he went on unheeding.

"I was an only son, and I think my father loved me better than anything on earth. And I believe I broke his heart. When I was one-and-twenty I married against his will."

"Married?"

The single word was almost inaudible : even in the shadow he noted the deadly pallor of her face. But he went on unflinching, bringing out his words with a distinctness that was almost defiant.

"Against his will I married an actress. She was a beautiful woman : and I was only twenty-one. I had to choose between my father and my wife and—I chose the woman. From the day I married her until he died I never saw my father's face again. He disowned me as he had said that he would do, and I believe it was I who killed him."

He paused and drew a long breath, but the girl did not speak. Her head had sunk lower and lower as each curt sentence fell on her ear, but the soft pressure

of her hands did not relax, though they were cold now and a shiver ran through her frame.

And the moon, clearing the topmost branches of the pine trees, flooded the verandah for a moment with its light and disappeared behind a bank of cloud. From the lake below came the hoarse croak of bull-frogs.

"I won't dwell upon the details, or the hopeless wretchedness of my married life. It was a part of my punishment and I deserved it. When I found myself dependent upon a woman whom I despised, I realised the depths to which a man can fall. I don't know how long that degradation lasted in reality ; to me it seemed a lifetime ; and it was not until I discovered that the woman I had made my wife was a confirmed drunkard that I faced the situation. Then we separated ; I was to go my way, and she her's ; we agreed never to meet again. I came to America and began my life afresh under a new name, the life and name that you have known.

"And then, suddenly, you came into my life and for the first time I realised what it was that I had done. May, you will never know the struggle that I have been through ; you can never understand the terrible temptation that I have fought against. On the one side my love for you, on the other the knowledge that I was bound for life to a woman whom I loathe. One expiation only lay within my power, and at last, too late, I determined to make it."

The white face looked up into his own, and there was a world of sympathy in the tear-dimmed eyes.

"You did what you felt to be right," she whispered, "as you have always done. It is never too late for that."

"It is too late," he repeated. "The woman has come back."

He felt the shiver that shook her frame and the sudden tension of the cold hands, and he continued:

"To-day she has come back to recall all that I had tried to live down. This morning I parted from her for the last time, for ever."

The girl sprang to her feet and faced him, with a wild light in her eyes and a fierce eagerness in her voice that turned him sick and cold.

"You have parted from her," she said breathlessly. "What do you mean to do?"

And he answered wearily.

"To wish you good-bye, and to leave the country. After that—God knows what."

CHAPTER XXIII

TWILIGHT

IN the long silence which followed, whilst he stood beside her waiting for the girl to speak, there came home to him the full measure of his loss, and he realised in all its dreary truth the blank hopelessness of that future which lay before them both.

Not until himself had severed, irrevocably, the links which had bound him to her, did he truly understand what the girl's love had meant for him.

And even in that moment his strong nature asserted itself as he reflected, with a feeling akin to triumph, that the decisive action had been of his own planning, that the compulsion which they had brought to bear upon him had come too late.

That was what had robbed the woman of her triumph and Marks of his revenge. They had not been able to hurry the crisis by a single moment ; indeed they had merely delayed it by an hour.

The thought had given him a certain sense of power, strengthening his resolve to put his meaning beyond a doubt, while he had spoken the words which must shatter the hope of both their lives ; spoken them with

a directness almost brutal, and intensified perhaps by the girl's silence.

Now that it was done, the inevitable reaction swept over him, and the thought of that dread future which lay beyond struck a chill to his very heart.

Suddenly she raised her head, and the piteous grey eyes looked into his own.

"Why," she asked, "Oh, why did you not tell me before?"

"I could not," he answered. "When first I knew you my past was dead and buried from all the world. I had escaped from it and begun my life again; I could not rake it up and feel that I was an object of pity to you. There are things that men such as I cannot do,—it may be from life-long habit, it may be only from pride. Then, when I suddenly realised where our friendship had led, it was too late. I knew that I loved you with all my soul, and more, I knew that you loved me. And all the while I had a lingering hope that she, this devil who is my wife, might die and set me free."

"Hush, Jim, hush." The voice was awed and low. "You must not speak like that."

"Why not?" He laughed in his bitterness. "Why not? Why should I deceive myself or try to hide my meaning? She stood between us and I hated her. Hated her, do you understand? Yes, I hoped that she might die. I would to God she had!"

Even in her misery the savage recklessness of his words struck home to her, and she realised something of the depth of passion which must have stirred him before his lips could frame them. And with that knowledge there passed away the first numbing horror which had almost paralysed her brain, which had clogged her senses, and bereft her of words. As the mist cleared, and his true meaning came home to her, the nature of the girl gave place in one moment to that of the loving, passionate woman. In that awful moment she too saw the empty years that lay before her ; and over that barren future there brooded the shadow of despair.

Still holding his hand in both her own, she drew him close to her side, a strange light gleaming in her eyes, and her bosom heaving wildly beneath the uncontrollable passion which thrilled her. She raised her lips to his and kissed him wildly, passionately.

It was the inevitable outcome of the lonely years, the price the country claims of every girl who grows to womanhood within its poisoned atmosphere. Year after year the plant may grow, unseen and unsuspected, waiting its appointed time : the crisis comes ; and lo ! within an hour, the developed flower blooms forth defiant, and full blown.

In a moment his arm was about her waist, and her head lay pillowed on his shoulder. Momentarily the sudden transition held no meaning for him ; he did not

understand. Only he knew that it was for the last time, that never in his life again should he hold her thus.

"My darling," he whispered. "Tell me that you forgive me."

Again he saw the wild light that leaped into her eyes.

"Forgive you!" she echoed. "Yes, I forgive you, because I love you: love you better than anything in all the world, as I have loved you from the first. Jim, do you know what that love means? You are mine: my very own: part of my life: part of myself. I cannot live without you: nothing can come between us now. I love you, do you understand, I love you."

The words came in short, quick gasps, and again she pressed her burning lips to his, whilst the first vague presentiment of her meaning came home to him.

And the hot blood surged to his head as the lithe young body moulded itself against his own, so close that he could feel the wild beating of her heart.

"You are mine: my very own."

The words thrilled him; intoxicated him; beating in upon his throbbing brain with a thousand intangible hopes and possibilities. His hands grew cold and his lips dry and parched. The choking lump that rose within his throat strangled back the words he strove to speak. He was under a wild intoxicating spell, a spell

in which the scent of the roses crushed against her breast and the faint perfume of her hair were strangely, madly mingled.

Then, suddenly, the moon sailed out from behind the bank of cloud, bathing the garden in its cold white light; and from the farther shore of the lake came the long low hoot of a night owl. It sounded in his ear like the mocking laugh of some lurking, listening devil.

With a strong effort he forced himself to speak.

"God help us both, my child," he said, and his voice quivered under the restraint which he put upon himself. "I don't think you will ever know how I have loved you, or what your words have meant to me. So long as I live I shall never forgive myself; and to my dying day I shall never forget."

He heard the sharp indrawing of her breath, and felt the shudder that ran through all her frame.

"It is the last time, my darling," he said. "The last time we shall ever meet. Kiss me once more, May; kiss me and say good-bye."

"No, no," she cried. "A thousand times, no. It is not good-bye; it is not the last time; for you shall not go. Do you hear, you shall not go. I've told you that I love you: that you're mine: my very own. Yes, and I'm your's; can't you understand? Yours, body and soul. Take me and do what you will with me. Take me away from here; from this wretched country; from

this lonely life. I'll go to the end of the world with you. I'll do anything you tell me ; I'll be your slave. Only take me with you ; only take me with you."

Her voice faltered and broke ; she hid her burning face upon his shoulder, and burst into a passion of sobs that seemed to tear her very soul.

And again the madness of desire possessed him. That wild unreasoning madness that lurks beneath the outward calm of such a man's reserve surged upwards in its intolerable strength, breaking all the bonds of habit and self-restraint, whispering a thousand maddening temptations in his ear. Words that he dared not frame, thoughts that he dared not shape, shook him, gripped him, waged their wild war within his being.

And upon the naked passions of those two human souls the great white moon looked down, cold, pure, and unpitying.

And once again, between clenched teeth, he muttered : "God help us both."

The strength of his temptation none but himself might gauge. The smouldering passion, long curbed by an indomitable will, fed by the solitude of his lonely life, by the reckless lawlessness of such a life itself and by the subtly demoralising influence of its surroundings, leaped into fierce and sudden flame. His earlier struggle of that morning, his meeting with the woman whom the law had made his wife, the self-

sacrifice of the girl whom he loved with all his being, these were but the additional fuel wherewith the devil seeks to feed that conflagration which is almost beyond the power of human being to resist.

Almost; but not quite. Suddenly, before his disordered vision, above the throbbing passion of his beating brain, there rose a picture of a fair-haired woman for whose good name he had once risked his life. His own words came back to him with startling distinctness.

"You can trust your sister, and you can trust me." He looked down upon the white-clad fragile figure which clung about his neck, sobbing out her very heart in her agony. And the man who, all his life, had scoffed at morals as the religion of fools, held true in the hour of his temptation to the principles of his own simple creed.

Very tenderly he looked down into May's face, and so softly he spoke that she scarcely recognised his voice.

"My little girl," he said, "I have done you a greater wrong than you can understand. I would to God that I might bear my punishment alone. But some day you will learn to forgive me, for you will realise the depths of my temptation. I can never forgive myself, but there is one last pang of misery that I can spare you still."

He folded her in his strong arms and covered the

tear-stained face with kisses, while the crushed petals of the crimson roses fell at their feet.

Before her eyes a great mist gathered and spread. Blindly she stretched her hands forth to repel the gathering darkness, and a voice came faintly to her as from a great, great distance off.

"God bless you, my darling. Good-bye."

Very gently he laid the nerveless form down amongst the cushions of the deep deck chair, and once again he kissed the cold pale lips. Then, with a deep-drawn breath, he strode out bareheaded into the moonlit garden, alone.

A moment later, striving blindly to overcome that numbing faintness which had laid its chill hand upon her heart, the girl staggered to her feet with wild and piteous eyes that scarcely saw.

And the cry of a breaking heart went out into the moonlight.

"Ah, no, don't leave me, Jim. Don't leave me."

But the only answer was the croak of a mighty bullfrog from the lake and the steady beat of a galloping pony's hoofs.

CHAPTER XXIV

NIGHT

IT was over, the ordeal he had dreaded, and the victory was his. But it had been dearly bought. The sudden maddening temptation which he had met and conquered by the exercise of his indomitable will had racked and shaken him as no mere physical exertion could have done.

In the brief interval which preceded the lassitude of that inevitable reaction which must surely follow, he was filled with a wild sense of reckless stimulation which was closely akin to madness. The hot blood surged within his brain and his temples throbbed almost to bursting, whilst every nerve and fibre of his body thrilled and tingled to the fierce beating of his heart.

Instinctively, he sought the only antidote from which his mood might find relief in furious physical exertion.

Regardless of direction and destination alike, the cowboy galloped bareheaded at headlong, breakneck speed through the solitude of the moonlit pine woods. And the grey mare, under the unwonted pressure of knee and spur, unguided and unchecked, swerved as a

beaten animal will from the direct line of the avenue's heavy sandy track into a grass-grown trail which lay at an angle to it.

Her rider took no heed, swaying mechanically to the turn, unconscious and unnoticing. It mattered nothing to him where they might go, so long as the furious pace should last. Behind him lay all that his lonely life had held worth living for; before him nothing but a vista of weary solitude. But he dared not pause nor think; at any cost he must push onward.

Faster and faster yet he drove the galloping pony, striving to outdistance that which he could never leave behind.

The woods were strangely silent in the moonlight, and the shadows of the pine trees lay black and clear defined across the track.

Once they met and passed a rickety buckboard drawn by a startled mule. Its wondering occupant stared in sleepy surprise and shouted an inaudible warning as they fled swiftly by.

And the cowboy, pulling out into the roadside scrub, cursed him as he galloped on.

Whither he was heading he neither knew nor cared. But straight before him in the moonlight there loomed the crazy structure that bridged the Devil's Creek.

The instinct of the animal beneath him warned her of the impending danger, and with a sudden snort of

fear she shortened her stride. For all answer he caught her short by the head, and, sitting down in his saddle, drove the sharp spurs home.

The game little pony answered to the call. Gathering her hind legs well under her, wearied as she was, she made her final effort in one last desperate attempt to clear the dreaded obstacle in her stride. But it was of no avail.

There came a crash of splintered timber as her weight struck the rotten planks midway, and the crazy guard-rail collapsed like matchwood beneath the impact.

And through the silent pine woods there rang a strange wild cry, that had in it something of defiant triumph, as horse and rider disappeared into the chasm below.

* * * * *

Cold and clear the white rays of the moonlight flooded the silent garden, creeping into the shadows of the deep verandah where May Allison sat alone with fixed and tearless eyes.

Under the cloudless sky the lake's clear waters gleamed and sparkled, while the noisy bull-frogs croaked their solemn chorus.

Over amongst the camp fires the wakeful negroes laughed and chattered. The tinkle of a banjo rose upon the night, and a deep bass voice broke into a well-known song.

A moment later the wailing chorus swelled into melodious harmony.

*"All de world am sad and dreary
Everywhere I roam,
Say, darkies, don't your hearts grow weary
Far from de old folks at home."*

The girl buried her face in her hands, sobbing as though her heart would break.

* * * * *

And a dozen miles away, on the further bank of the Devil's Creek, pinned to the ground by the lifeless weight of the good grey mare, the man she loved lay dead.

THE END.



